

Righteous indignation

By [Yossi Melman](#) and Asaf Carmel

Snow has played a decisive role in the life of Lily Stern-Pohlmann. When she escaped from the Lvov ghetto she trudged through knee-high drifts of it, on a Ukrainian winter night, until she reached the hiding place and was reunited with her mother. Afterward, about a year later, in late 1943 or early 1944 (she doesn't remember the exact date), on another snowy night, she and her mother fled for their lives again. This time, they found shelter in the compound attached to the cathedral of Lvov, in the quarters of the metropolitan (a bishop with provincial powers). She was only 11 years-old then, but the memory has stayed with her for over 60 years.

"He was a huge and impressive man. Even though he was confined to a wheelchair, the most noticeable thing about him was his tremendous physical size. To me, as a little girl, he looked like a giant. He had a thick white beard and warm eyes," she recalls her first meeting with Andrei Sheptyts'kyi, speaking by telephone from her home in London. "I was very scared. He put his hands on my head and said with a smile: 'Welcome, don't be afraid. I will save your life.'" And he kept his promise. A few months later, in the summer of 1944, the Red Army liberated the western provinces of Ukraine from Nazi occupation. Lily and her mother could stop hiding at last.

Over the past 50 years or so, Lily, her mother (who has since died) and a group of other Holocaust survivors and relatives, including Adam Rotfeld, currently the Polish foreign minister, have been trying to persuade the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial authority in Jerusalem to confer on the Ukrainian priest Andrei Sheptyts'kyi the title of "Righteous Among the Nations." But in vain. Aside from the persistent efforts of these survivors and a few brief mentions in history books, the story of Sheptyts'kyi has been consigned to oblivion. Nor was Yad Vashem moved by an article about him that was published in Maariv on the most recent Holocaust Day four months ago.

This is not just an argument about memory, forgetting and commemoration. In the backdrop, there is also a stinging debate about historical interpretation and historical "truth." On one side are the personal truths and histories of each one of

the survivors. And on the other: the truth as proclaimed by Yad Vashem, holder of the legal authority to grant the title, which views itself as the final arbiter on Holocaust history. The survivors are convinced that their own motives are pure and noble, while those of Yad Vashem, in their estimation, are also influenced by political and bureaucratic considerations. It is also a battle over time. As the passing years continue to cull the number of survivors, the phenomenon of forgetting history only gains momentum. With this in mind, the survivors are all the more determined to make their case.

In recent weeks, a small group has taken up its struggle anew. This time, they are being assisted by Prof. Shimon Redlich of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, a historian and expert on Eastern European Jewry. They are currently formulating a petition on which they aim to collect the signatures of other Holocaust survivors and public figures; the petition will then be sent to Yad Vashem along with a call for the institution to reconsider its position. In early November, the Ukrainian-Jewish organization Tkuma will hold a seminar in Lvov, with the participation of historians from Israel and the Ukraine, in appreciation of Sheptyts'kyi and his contribution to the Jewish people. But most of all, the Holocaust survivors and supporters of their struggle are drawing encouragement from the planned visit to Israel - in about two months - by Ukrainian president Victor Yushchenko, and are hopeful that the Foreign Ministry's attitude will also help: In the ministry, they're aware that the granting of this title to someone who is considered a national hero in the Ukraine could give a boost to relations between the two countries.

A snowy escape

Lily Stern was born in 1932 to a middle-class Jewish family in Lvov (which was then in Poland and is now in Ukraine). Her grandfather was a religious man, but her parents had abandoned tradition. Her father was a bank director, her mother a fashion designer. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 annexed Lvov and Poland's eastern provinces to the Soviet Union. In June 1941, in Operation Barbarossa, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and entered Lvov. "And the disaster began," as Lily describes it.

In August 1942, during the major aktzia (military action) in the Lvov ghetto, Ukrainian militiamen took away her father and brothers. "We never found out just what happened to them. They just disappeared and no evidence of them remained." Lily and her mother survived because they were staying at her grandparents' house at the time. Three months later, in November 1942, the ghetto was sealed and cut off from the rest of the city. Lily's mother had the good fortune to be outside the ghetto that night: Three sisters from Lvov had invited her to their home to design dresses for them.

"I waited for my grandfather and grandmother to fall asleep - late at night - and I decided to escape," recounts Lily Stern-Pohlmann, speaking from her home in London. "I left the house in my pajamas and walked in the snow toward a railroad embankment that surrounded the ghetto and marked its boundaries. Suddenly I heard people screaming, dogs barking and gunshots. I threw myself down flat on the ground and hid. After a while, the sounds died down. The guards apparently thought they'd hit and killed me, and it was such a cold night they didn't bother to check. I climbed up the embankment, sinking into the snow, and then I walked to the house where my mother was. My mother was so stunned she didn't know what to do."

The three sisters feared for their lives and explained that the mother and daughter would have to leave by morning. After much agonizing that went on until the wee hours, the mother decided to take a chance and went with her daughter to the home of an acquaintance, an unmarried German woman named Irmgard Wieth, who worked as a secretary in the municipal administration. "The German woman was in shock," recalls Lily, but the sight of the scared little girl in her pajamas evidently touched her. She agreed to hide the two in her home.

A few days later, the mother said she wanted to return to the ghetto to be with her parents. Wieth insisted that she not take Lily with her. "She'll stay here and if anything happens to you, I'll raise her and care for her," she promised. The mother returned to the ghetto and reunited with her parents. Not long afterward, while he was just walking down the street, Lily's grandfather was shot to death. Subsequently, her grandmother, not wishing to be a burden on her daughter, killed herself. Lily's mother then returned to the Wieth household where her daughter was hidden.

In the meantime, another pair of Jews whom the German secretary set out to save had joined the household. They were a pharmacist named Joseph Podoshin and his wife Anna. The four Jews continued hiding in the house until the winter of 1944. Then when the Red Army's counterattack began to topple the German defenses and to move toward Lvov, the German woman became very fearful. Like the other German employees in the municipal administration, she began making preparations to go back to her homeland. She asked the four Jews to look for an alternative shelter. The pharmacist Podoshin knew Metropolitan Sheptyts'kyi from before the war, when he supplied him and his church with medicines. With the sword hanging over their heads, Lily, her mother and the Podoshin couple went to the Cathedral of St. George (Yuri), to meet with Sheptyts'kyi in the metropolitan's residence.

A meteoric rise

Roman Sheptyts'kyi was born in 1865 to a Ukrainian noble family whose family tree could be traced as far back as the 13th century. Over the generations and living under Polish occupation, the family underwent a process of assimilation and adopted Polish customs, values and culture. When Sheptyts'kyi was a young man, Ukraine was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and he was drawn to the Ukrainian national movement, which sought to establish an independent state. He also expressed a desire to become a priest. Instead, his parents sent him to Germany to study law. Although he graduated with outstanding marks, instead of embarking on a legal career, he remained steadfast in his desire to join the priesthood.

When he finished his studies, in 1888, the young Sheptyts'kyi decided to travel to Italy, to see Pope Leon XIII and to consult with him about his future. He subsequently abandoned the Catholic Church for the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, changed his first name from Roman to Andrei and began studying in a seminary for priests. The Uniate Church was founded in 1596, when Ukraine was under Polish-Catholic rule: It preserved the Byzantine ceremonies and rituals, but recognized the pope as its ultimate authority. In Russia, it was dismantled by the czarist government and combined with the Pravoslaviv Church, though it continued to exist in the western provinces of Ukraine, which were under the Austro-Hungarian regime. This is still its center of power and it has between five and six million faithful today.

Sheptyts'kyi's rise within the church was meteoric and in 1900, at the age of 35, he was invested with the title of metropolitan and appointed head of the Church, a position he held until his death. In the history of Ukraine, his name is connected with the revival of the Church in western Ukraine in the first half of the 20th century. In 1903, Sheptyts'kyi founded the Studite monastic order, which built schools, orphanages and hospitals. These monasteries would later play an important role in saving Jews. Sheptyts'kyi also persuaded his brother, Kazimierz, a lawyer and member of the Austrian parliament who shared his nationalistic views, to give up his worldly pursuits and join the priesthood. Kazimierz changed his name to Clement and was appointed head of the Studite order.

In his early years in the Church, when he was just 20, Andrei Sheptyts'kyi began studying Hebrew and before long he was able to read the Bible in that language. Years later, he took pride in an exchange of letters with leaders of Jewish communities, written in elegant biblical Hebrew. In 1905 and 1906, he headed a group of pilgrims that visited the Holy Land. After his second visit, he wrote a religious guide book that included a description of pilgrimage routes, complete with maps and illustrations.

His study of the Hebrew language spurred the metropolitan to want to get to know Jews up close. "Acquaintance with Jews and with Judaism was an integral part of the intellectual and practical environment of Sheptyts'kyi," says Prof. Shimon Redlich, author of the book, "Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919-1945" (Indiana University Press, 2002). His special attitude toward the Jews was made manifest over the years in numerous friendly get-togethers with community rabbis. The greetings exchanged at these events were primarily in Hebrew. The very occurrence of such meetings was no trivial matter in a land where anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained. In his book, "Lvov Ghetto Diary," Dr. David Kahana (one of the people the metropolitan saved during the Holocaust), describes how Sheptyts'kyi prided himself on taking part in the kimha-depisha (alms for the poor) projects in his area before each Passover holiday.

When he turned 70, in 1935, a Jewish daily newspaper published a special congratulatory message from the Lvov Jewish community, praising the metropolitan for his high level of ethics and morals. The chief rabbi of Lvov's Reform community, Rabbi Dr. Ezekiel Lewin (whose two sons, Kurt and Nathan, were also later saved thanks to Sheptyts'kyi's actions) held a special reception in his honor.

Nationalist ties

Sheptyts'kyi also supported the Zionist settlement in the Land of Israel and expressed his enthusiastic opinion of it in a 1934 interview with Lieber Krumholz, a young Jewish journalist who later immigrated to Israel, changed his name to Haviv and was a member of the Haaretz editorial board for many years. Yet it must also be borne in mind that Sheptyts'kyi's attitude toward the Jews was motivated by his theological outlook and a missionary aspiration. "When I stand before a Jewish audience that is willing to hear me," he explained in one of his sermons, "I can't help but see them as people who are exposed to eternal devastation. This is why I see it as my duty to use the opportunity to bring them at least a single word of the divine revelation."

The head of the Uniate Church was first and foremost a Ukrainian patriot, who as early as 1905 built a Ukrainian national museum and supported the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state. In World War I, when Russia conquered Lvov, Sheptyts'kyi was imprisoned for two years. After the war, he returned to Lvov, which had now been annexed to Poland. In 1923, his younger brother Stanislaw, a general in the Polish army, was appointed the defense minister of Poland, but he himself, and his Church as an organization, formed close ties with the Ukrainian national movement.

It was natural for him to oppose the Soviet Union, which controlled a large part of Ukraine, because of the communist regime and Stalin's anti-religious policies. The resistance to the Soviet Union grew when Lvov was occupied by it in 1939 and came under Soviet rule for about two years. When the German army invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, he cheered it on in the hope that it meant the dream of Ukrainian independence would now be fulfilled. In a letter "To the Ukrainian Nation," the metropolitan proclaimed: "We see the German army as the savior from the enemy."

The clearly anti-Semitic Ukrainian national movement, headed by Stefan Bandera and Andrei Melnik, held a similar view. Even when the movement realized that Hitler had no intention of letting the Ukrainians establish an independent state and it went underground, Sheptyts'kyi supported the establishment of a Ukrainian military force the Halychyna Division - which operated within the framework of the SS and participated in mass killings of Jews.

But at the same time, as Rabbi Kahana writes in his book, Sheptyts'kyi also did not hesitate to compose a "shepherds' letter" in which he called on the new government to issue directives and rules that would ensure the welfare of all inhabitants of the land, without regard to faith, nationality or social class. Kahana is convinced that the metropolitan was referring to the Jews. And this was written at a time when SS units, with the assistance of auxiliary Ukrainian units, had already begun massacring Jews. Heinrich Himmler, the SS commander, heard about the letter and ordered Sheptyts'kyi arrested, but the German commander in Lvov informed him that such a move would arouse the fury of Ukrainians, for whom this clergyman was a national hero, and could thus pose a danger to the German army. Himmler was persuaded and withdrew his demand.

Later on, in February 1942, the metropolitan sent a direct letter to Himmler in which he demanded that all Ukrainian police officers be removed from all the actions involving killings of Jews. In his letter, he denounced the Germans' treatment of the Ukrainian population, and of the Jews in particular, and protested the use of Ukrainian police in actions against the Jews. In his letter to Himmler, Sheptyts'kyi wrote that the Ukrainian was basically a primitive human being and would eventually do to his own people what he did to the Jews, that he was becoming accustomed to murder and would not easily be weaned from it.

According to Prof. Redlich's research, "at least three people (one of them was Rabbi Kahana) testified that they saw Sheptyts'kyi's letter to Himmler. However, the original cannot be obtained, nor can any copy of it." Afterward, the metropolitan published his famous "shepherds' letter" under the heading "Thou Shalt Not Kill," and in March, 1942 sent a letter to Pope Pius XII in which he warned about the murder of the Jews at the hands of the Germans and their Ukrainian minions. In another letter to the Vatican, from August, 1942, which was

written in the shadow of the aktzias of that month, in which about 50,000 Jews from the Lvov ghetto were sent to their deaths, he spoke out against the Nazi regime: "When we were liberated by the German army from the Bolshevik burden we felt a certain relief. Now everyone agrees that the German regime is perhaps worse and more evil than the Bolshevik one." He also conveyed directives to the people of his sect to hide Jews in churches, monasteries and orphanages in order to save them from the genocide. And, in this, he also set a personal example.

Tale of two families

The two best documented and well-known cases of Jews being saved by the metropolitan are the case of Rabbi David Kahana and of the family of Rabbi Ezekiel Lewin. In early September 1941, Lewin visited Sheptyts'kyi in his residence at the Cathedral. Sheptyts'kyi urged the rabbi to stay there, but he decided to return to his family and his community. He was arrested that same day by Ukrainians and murdered together with other Jews. As a moral duty to the rabbi, Sheptyts'kyi instructed that refuge be found for his two sons, Kurt and Nathan. The two were hidden in the cathedral and in monasteries associated with the church, and survived.

Kahana was born in 1903 in eastern Galicia. He studied at the university in Vienna and in a rabbinic seminary. He eventually came to Lvov where he taught and served as the rabbi of one of the local synagogues. In August 1942, a year after the Germans occupied the city, he put his three-year-old daughter in Sheptyts'kyi's care. Two months later, his wife also found refuge in one of the church's monasteries. Kahana himself remained in the ghetto and was later transferred to the Janowski forced-labor camp.

In May 1943, after over 6,000 Jewish prisoners were slaughtered in the camp in one day, Kahana managed to flee. He made his way to Sheptyts'kyi's residence and asked for shelter. "He greeted me with great warmth," Kahana wrote in his book, "Lvov Ghetto Diary." "There were those same good, intelligent eyes. They promised me: Here you will stay. Here we will help you. Nothing bad will happen to you. He said: 'Please tell me what has happened to you ...' I started to tell him about what went on in the camp. I told him about the horrors and the cruelty, about the killing, about the roll calls in the camp ... I saw tears streaming down his cheeks."

Two days later, he spoke with Clement Sheptyts'kyi, the metropolitan's brother: "For a few hours, he sat with me in my corner. He comforted me and brought me greetings from my wife and daughter. For safety reasons, he didn't want to tell me their location ... It was enough to know that they were safe and well. My wife had been given good Ukrainian ID papers and the girl was being brought up in one of the children's homes."

In his book, Rabbi Kahana describes how he was initially hidden in Sheptyts'kyi's residence and later, for his own protection, smuggled from place to place. The rabbi spent the summer of 1943 in a Studite monastery near the cathedral. At first he stayed in one of the monastic cells, but shortly afterward was smuggled up to the roof and from there to a hiding place in the library. He worked on cataloging the books there and a well-fortified hiding place was set up for him. Whenever the Germans entered the monastery, the bell rang in the library and Kahana crept through the shelves to his hiding place. He survived six such searches.

Later on, Kahana was brought back to the hiding place in the cathedral. The metropolitan's personal secretary gave him several books on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to help keep up his spirits. But Kahana did not find the books' depictions of Jews and the Jewish Yishuv (pre-state community) in the Land of Israel very flattering. One day, he mustered the courage and asked Sheptyts'kyi his opinion of this matter. The metropolitan condemned the persecution of the Jews, but also lectured him about their sin against Jesus. The day after this conversation, the metropolitan asked to see him again.

"Our talk yesterday caused me a sleepless night," Kahana quotes Sheptyts'kyi in his book. "My conscience is tormented. In the difficult situation we have today, when the Jewish people is shedding so much blood and sacrificing hundreds of thousands of innocent victims, I shouldn't have touched on this issue. I ask you: Forgive me."

After the war, Kahana worked to revive the religious communities in Poland and served as chief rabbi in the Polish army. In 1950, he immigrated to Israel with his family and was appointed chief rabbi of the air force. He also served for several years as the chief rabbi of Argentina. He died at a ripe old age in 1998.

'A great injustice'

It's not clear how many Jews were saved by Andrei Sheptyts'kyi. Some scholars, such as historian Shimon Redlich (himself a Holocaust survivor, though not with Sheptyts'kyi's help), estimate that the number was at least 150. Others believe that he "only" saved several dozen. For decades, the survivors have been trying to convince Yad Vashem to grant their benefactor the recognition and respect that are certain he deserves. In addition, veteran journalist and film director Nathan Gross, now 86, is also toiling on behalf of the cause.

"I didn't have any personal connection with Sheptyts'kyi," says Gross. "I didn't live in his region and he didn't save me. I just think that a great injustice is being done here."

For over 20 years, Gross was a member of the Righteous Among the Nations committee in Yad Vashem's Tel Aviv branch. (There are two more local committees, in Jerusalem and Haifa, and a general assembly.) "We had maybe 20 meetings about the Sheptyts'kyi case," he recalls. "Rabbi Kahana wept when he requested that Sheptyts'kyi be given the title and I fought like a lion, but it didn't help. No one denied the facts and they all told Kahana that his story was genuinely moving, but the majority decided against. It was a political decision. I think the fear was what would the Jews in the world say if Yad Vashem granted the title of Righteous Among the Nations to a Ukrainian nationalist. Usually, the people on these committees are not people who went through the Holocaust themselves. The argument with them occurs over them not having felt the Holocaust themselves. They only know it through thousands of testimonies."

Since the 1960s, the special committee at Yad Vashem, which has the authority to grant the title, has met to discuss Sheptyts'kyi's case 13 times. And 13 times it has turned down the requests from Holocaust survivors.

Yad Vashem spokeswoman Iris Rosenberg: "The decision not to recognize Sheptyts'kyi as a Righteous Among the Nations is the decision of the committee for citing the Righteous Among the Nations, which operates alongside Yad

Vashem. The committee is made up almost entirely of Holocaust survivors and is headed by a retired Supreme Court justice. It is an independent and sovereign committee that operates in a process similar to a jury and makes its decisions by voting. Between 1964 and 1991, the committee discussed the request to recognize Sheptyts'kyi 13 times. All were meetings of general assembly of the committee headed by the committee chairs, Justice Landau and afterward, Justice Beisky. At the last meeting of the general assembly in 1991, it again decided, unanimously, not to recognize him as a Righteous Among the Nations."

Since it is a type of juridical body, the protocols of the committee are classified and therefore cannot be reviewed for the purpose of divining the judges' reasoning. But from conversations with people familiar with the issue, it appears that there were also very senior figures at Yad Vashem who felt that the committee's decisions were wrong and a distortion of the historic truth. One of these is Prof. Israel Gutman, a historian and editor of the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, who tried to get the committee to alter its decision. His view was shared by another historian who worked at Yad Vashem, Dr. Aharon Weiss, who was one of the authors of the Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities, published by the institution. In the section on eastern Galicia, he wrote that in those days of collaboration between many Ukrainians and the Nazis in the extermination of the Jews, "Metropolitan Sheptyts'kyi stood out ... and already in the early days of the Nazi occupation extended assistance to Jews. He subsequently did even more, during the time of the mass deportations to the extermination [camps] when he published a 'shepherds' letter' openly denouncing the murder of the Jews and influenced the priests and nuns of his church, who gave shelter to Jews. And indeed, with their assistance, about 150 Jews were saved."

Weiss is one of the organizers of the Lvov conference due to take place in November, which will focus on an assessment of Sheptyts'kyi's actions. "He is a noble figure, but he is also a tragic figure, a Shakespearean figure," says Weiss. "On the one hand, he knew Hebrew, he had a warm and deep bond with the Jewish community up to the war and during the war he helped to save Jews, and therefore he deserves more than one title. But on the other hand, he also had a close bond with the nationalist movement and he collaborated with the Germans."

Weiss adds candidly that in the past, he, too, did not think that Sheptyts'kyi was deserving of the title, but now is not as certain: "I'm no longer unequivocal about it and I would like to see Yad Vashem use a little creative imagination."

'Worthy of recognition'

Last month, at the Univ Monastery near Lvov, a moving ceremony was held in commemoration of Sheptyts'kyi's actions. One of the participants was Adam Daniel Rotfeld, who was a little boy during the war and is now the foreign minister of Poland. Rotfeld is quite unhappy with Israel's attitude. In his speech at the ceremony and in letters he sent to several Holocaust survivors, Rotfeld said: "Unfortunately, Andrei Sheptyts'kyi's moral courage has not earned their full recognition. They still deny him the title of Righteous Among the Nations. I am deeply certain that not only is he worthy of such recognition, but that such recognition will have a positive and significant influence on the young generation in Ukraine." The Israeli Foreign Ministry agrees, believing that such recognition will improve the ties between the two countries.

Lily Stern-Pohlmann was hidden for some time in a monastery and at the end of

the war, with the help of Rabbi Kahana and a Jewish-British charitable organization, was sent with her mother to London. She became a successful translator and worked for a time for Monaco's UN delegation. Shortly after the war, the daughter and mother (who died about four years ago) sought to help the German woman Irmgard Wieth, who had given them shelter in her apartment in Lvov. They located her in a refugee camp on the German-Czech border, brought her to London and subsequently helped her emigrate to the United States and secure employment there.

Stern-Pohlmann is especially frustrated because Yad Vashem agreed to grant the title of Righteous Among the Nations to the metropolitan's brother, Kazimierz Sheptyts'kyi, to a number of monks and nuns from the Studite order and to Wieth, a German, but has consistently refused to grant the same recognition to the person who stood at the head of the operation to save Jews and whose inspiration was key.

"I've written to everyone at Yad Vashem, including the head of the department for the Righteous Among the Nations, Dr. Mordechai Paldiel," Stern-Pohlmann says in a phone conversation. "I asked them what's the difference between Oskar Schindler and Sheptyts'kyi. Schindler was a member of the Nazi Party and he saved Jews. Sheptyts'kyi was a Ukrainian nationalist who saved Jews and risked his standing and his life. So why isn't he deserving?"

"Before long, we'll also go the way of Rabbi Kahana," says Oded Amarant, another survivor who was saved by Sheptyts'kyi and who is active in the Children Holocaust Survivors foundation, "and then who will have any idea who Sheptyts'kyi was?"