

## **THE RESCUE OF THE GREAT RABBI**

### **A Personal Memoir by Dr. Michael Shkilnyk \***

*The authenticity of the events described herein has been upheld and confirmed by the Jewish United Hias Service in Tel Aviv, Israel*

The Great Rabbi, as he was called by the Jewish people, was Aaron Rokach, the Rabbi of Belz (western Ukraine). A descendant of a very old family of rabbis, he was known not only in Ukraine, but in the entire Jewish world. The Orthodox Jews worshipped him. In Belz, he was visited by important men and women not only of the Jewish faith, but also by famous personalities of the Christian world, including members of the royal families of Europe. The Jewish people went to him for advice in important family and political matters, and they followed his advice very closely. He had wider fame and enjoyed greater confidence than any other rabbi in western Ukraine, greater even than the Rabbi of Lviv whose life was saved by Metropolitan Andrew Sheptytsky.

I do not know exactly when the Rabbi of Belz resettled in the town of Peremyslany. I think it may have been near the end of the first Soviet occupation [1941], for at that time, fleeing from the advance of the German army into Ukraine, many Jewish people came to this town. In any case, the arrival and residence of the Great Rabbi in Peremyslany was held in greatest secrecy. I learned of it only after I had become mayor of Peremyslany, a town where for seventeen years I had served on the judicial bench. Thanks to the Providence of God, I was also the only judge to survive the NKVD [secret police] terror of the first Soviet occupation.

Immediately after the entry of the German army into Peremyslany, on July 1, 1941, a mass grave was opened containing the bodies of 39 leading Ukrainians who had been murdered by the NKVD and buried the night before. After the mutilated bodies had been exhumed and legal and medical investigations completed, it was necessary to re-bury the bodies immediately, because of the heat. To do this, permission was required from the local military commander. After midnight of July 2nd, I received this permission. The German commander, however, used this occasion to pressure me into accepting the duties of mayor. Fully aware of both the responsibilities of this position and the consequences attendant upon refusal, I finally accepted.

Within a week of the German occupation of the town, as I was sitting in my legal chambers, the secretary of the municipal council burst in upon me and, terrified, told me that the Jewish quarter was ablaze. German soldiers had spread gasoline over all four of the synagogues and set fire to them. While encouraging the worst elements of the local population to attack Jews, the soldiers snatched individuals and threw them into the conflagration.

A few days later, a delegation of Jewish people came to see me. From them, I first learned that the Great Rabbi of Belz was resident in Peremyslany and that his only son had perished in the fire. The delegation also informed me that an armed band had entered the dwelling of the Rabbi and robbed it, taking antique silver and gold ritual religious objects, a mink coat, and other items. Similar pilfering and robbery of Jewish households was occurring all over the city. Disturbed by this report, I summoned the commander of the city police. I reprimanded him sharply for his failure to keep law and order and, under threat of dismissal, I ordered him to recover all the items that were stolen from the Rabbi. Within 24 hours, the police returned all of the Rabbi's belongings to me, and I returned them to him.

The plight of the Jewish population was becoming more tragic every day. Under the jurisdiction of the Gestapo, the Germans created the Jewish Council (Judenrat) and the Jewish

police. The Ghetto was established, household belongings were confiscated, frequent monetary contributions were requested, forced labour began, and the strongest individuals began to be removed to concentration camps. All this created great fear - a hell which even Dante could not describe. Even so, I knew of many acts of mercy and sacrifice towards the Jews on the part of both the Ukrainian and Polish population, in spite of the fact that this aid was severely punished, sometimes by confinement in concentration camps. In other words, a slow martyred death.

In the midst of these circumstances, a delegation representing the Great Rabbi and the entire Jewish population of the town again came to see me. They asked me to save the life of the Great Rabbi. Upon some reflection, I told the delegation that I could not do this for they, themselves, were well aware of the consequences should this action come to the attention of the Germans. The penalty for hiding a high-ranking Jewish leader was death to me and my family at the hands of the Gestapo. I stated that I deeply sympathized with the tragic position of the Jewish population and the fate of the Rabbi. I could give them no other assurances on this matter because the delegation consisted of a large number of people and I felt a need to establish absolute secrecy.

The desire to rescue the Rabbi, the knowledge of the great risk I was taking, persecuted me for several days. Walking down the street, three doors from my own home, I noticed an empty three-storey building, whose previous inhabitants had been transferred to the ghetto. It seemed to me that the attic apartment in this building would be a good hiding place for the Rabbi.

The City Council employed an electrician named A. Zilber, a Jewish person who had escaped liquidation and whom I knew to be cooperative and trustworthy. I summoned him and told him that I was designating the empty three-storey building as storage for city electrical equipment and that, effective immediately, he would be solely responsible for the whole building. I ordered that an appropriate billboard be prepared and hung at the entrance doors, and told him he could locate someone in the attic apartment to serve as a watchman against theft. Mr. Zilber understood exactly whom I had in mind. He fulfilled my orders well and served as an expert liaison between myself, the Rabbi and the outside world.

After some time, I decided to visit the Great Rabbi and make his acquaintance. I entered his quarters after midnight and we greeted each other cordially. The Rabbi thanked me for my assistance, but was greatly depressed by the sorrow that had befallen him and the Jewish people. He spoke little, but eagerly listened to my report of the contemporary local and world situation.

One day, at the end of August 1942, my wife phoned me to return home immediately, because a high-ranking officer of an unknown army had arrived in front of my home in an elegant car and requested a private meeting. At home, I found a Hungarian Colonel who told me that, on the authorization of the Minister of Defense in Budapest, he had a certain mission to perform. When we were alone, the Colonel asked me whether I could point out to him the residence of the Rabbi of Belz and arrange for a meeting. For a minute, I remained silent. The thought flashed through my mind that this might be a Gestapo provocation, and that the end had come for both the Rabbi and for myself. Finally, I answered that I did not know whether such a person resides in the city, but that I could introduce him to someone who might possibly know of such things.

In a few days, Mr. Zilber, the electrician notified me that the Rabbi again asked me to visit him. I complied with this request and found the Rabbi in a much better frame of mind than formerly. He was calmer and talked freely. He treated me with dried fruit and good tokay wine.

All this he had received from Hungarian Jews via the Colonel. He was thus supplied with money and food to the extent that he told me that I no longer needed to provide him with food and supplies. We sincerely bade each other farewell, not realizing that this would be our last meeting.

Not long after, Mr. Zilber brought me the news that, at night, the Rabbi had been taken out of the city - where he did not know. For a few months, I was unable to determine whether the Rabbi had been captured or spirited out of the country so that his life could be spared. This deeply troubling mystery was clarified one autumn evening in 1943. A very elegant lady, whom I recognized to be a close relative of the Rabbi, visited me. From her I learned that the Rabbi of Belz had been taken to Bokhnia, near Cracow, where he still resided. She said that recently his stay there was becoming dangerous, and that he had asked to return to Peremyslany under my guardianship. I explained to her that this move would likely increase his danger, but with the help of Hungarian Jews, he should be taken to Hungary. She was satisfied with this advice, and said that she would act accordingly.

A few years later, I received news from Israel that the Great Rabbi of Belz had successfully made the trip from Bokhnia to Budapest, and from there to the Promised Land, independent Israel. For myself, after a great deal of danger and tremendous suffering, I managed to escape to the freedom of Canada.

I write this memoir in the hope that the described act of mercy will be a contributing factor towards positive Ukrainian-Jewish relations. The events described here are not unique. Despite the cruelty and terrorism of the Hitler regime, many Ukrainians aided the Jews in moral and material ways. This sympathy with the Jewish population required great, even heroic, acts of compassion. Many were caught and martyred by the Germans. My close friend in Peremyslany, the Rev. Emilian Kovch, was one.

\* Translated from the original, written in Ukrainian.