

Translation from Ukrainian.

Dr.M.Shkilnyk

The Rescue of a Great Rabbi
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Writing about an episode the authenticity of which is upheld by the Jewish United Hias Service in Tel Aviv (Israel), I'm hoping that the described act of mercy will be a contributing factor toward the clarification of Ukrainian-Jewish relations. The episode described here is not unique. There are hundreds and even thousands of such instances. The attitude of the population of Western Ukraine was one of opposition toward the mass anti-Jewish actions of hostility. The sympathy of the Ukrainians was with the suffering Jewish population.

Despite the cruelty and terrorism of the Hitler regime, beginning with our Metropolitan Andrew Sheptytsky and ending with the average man, the Jewish population had the moral and material support of all classes of the Ukrainian population. As is evident from the martyred death of the late Rev.Emilian Kovch, this sympathy with the Jewish population required great, in fact heroic, efforts and sacrifice.

It is, therefore, necessary to point out with bitterness that the leading Jewish circles and the Jewish press fail to recognize this and continue to maintain an attitude of enmity to the Ukrainian people, their efforts towards independence, and their heroes and national leaders.

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 Western Ukraine but in the entire Jewish world. The Orthodox Jews worshipped him almost like a God; in Belz he was visited by great personalities not only of the Jewish world, but also by famous personalities of the Christian world among them members of royal families.

The Jewish population went to him for advice in the most important family matters and political problems and they followed his advice very closely. He had wider fame and enjoyed greater confidence than any other rabbi - greater than that of the Rabbi of Lviv who was rescued by the late Metropolitan A. Sheptytsky.

I do not know exactly when the physically weak rabbi resettled in the city of Peremyshlany - but I think it was near the end of the first soviet occupation for at that time fleeing before the advance of the German Army into Ukraine - many Jews (about 1,200) came to this city. The arrival and residence of this rabbi was held in greatest secrecy. I learned of it only after I had become the mayor of Peremyshlany, the city where for 17 years I had served on the judicial bench and, thanks to the Providence of God, I was the only judge to survive the NKVD terror of the first occupation.

Immediately after the entry of the German army into the city on July 1, 1941, the mass grave in which 39 murdered leading Ukrainians from the Peremyshlany district had been buried the night before was opened. After the mutilated bodies had been exhumed and legal and medical investigations completed, it was necessary because of the heat, to rebury the bodies immediately. To do this permission was required from the local military commander. After midnight of July 2nd, I together with Father E. Kovch received this permission. The German general used this occasion to pressure me into accepting the duties of the mayor. Fully aware of what heavy responsibilities would confront me in this position, I finally accepted.

About a week after the arrival of the German army, as I was sitting in my legal chambers, St. Hishchynsky, the secretary of the municipal council, burst in upon me about noon and terrified told me that the Jewish quarters were ablaze and that anti-Jewish pogroms had commenced. Surprised by this incredible bit of information, I prepared to go to the site of the trouble only to have the secretary bar my path saying, "I will not let you go - the German soldiers have spread gasoline over all four of the synagogues, set fire to them and

are now snatching Jews and throwing them into the conflagration and encouraging the worse elements of the population to physical attack upon the Jews. If you interfere with the acts of the German soldiers you will not help matters but will only succeed in exposing yourself to great danger."

I am briefly mentioning this episode because the son of the Rabbi of Belz perished in this pogrom - he was thrown alive into the burning synagogue. This was a tragic blow to the rabbi - because this was the only descendant in the line to keep the rabbinical line which had stretched over a thousand years unbroken.

A few days later a Jewish delegation came to see me. From it I first learned that the Rabbi of Belz was in Peremyshlany - and of the death of his son. It also informed me that an armed band had entered the dwelling of the rabbi, robbed it completely, taking even an antique silver and gold ritual religious object, a mink coat, underclothing, bedding, and other items and that similar pilfering and robbery was occurring in the city more and more often. Disturbed by this unpleasant report, I immediately summoned the commander of the city police. I reprimanded him sharply for his failure to keep law and order in spite of the fact that he commanded an armed police and under the threat of dismissing his force if he failed, I commanded him to recover the belongings of the rabbi. Within 24 hours the police returned all the rabbi's belongings to me and I returned them to him.

The plight of the Jewish population became more tragic every day: Jewish Council (Judenrat) and Jewish police - strictly under the jurisdiction of the Gestapo - were created, frequent monetary contributions were requested, household belongings were confiscated, forced labor was established, the strongest Jews were removed to concentration camps, the Ghetto was established. Famine, epidemics, executions, all this created great fear - hell which even Dante could not describe. Here I must state that both the Ukrainian as well as the Polish population of the city sympathized deeply with the suffering of the Jews and showed many acts of mercy and sacrifice; and one must remember

that aid to Jews was punishable by death or confinement in the concentration camp - in other words a slow martyred death.

In the midst of such circumstances a delegation representing the rabbi and the entire Jewish population once again came to see me and requested me to save the life only of the rabbi - his family would share the fate of the other Jews. Upon some reflection I told the delegation that I could not do this for they, themselves, were well aware of the consequences for me should it become known that I hid a rabbi; I stated that I deeply sympathized with the tragic position of the Jewish population and the problem of the rabbi of Belz perplexed me deeply. I could give no other answer to a delegation consisting of a number of people because of the importance of the question and the need for secrecy.

However, the desire to rescue the rabbi persecuted me in spite of the knowledge of the great risk to my family and myself should I try to do so. Walking down the street I noticed an empty three-story building (three buildings away from my home) with an attic apartment the inhabitants of which had been transferred to the Ghetto. It seemed to me that this attic dwelling would be a good hiding place for the rabbi.

The city council employed an only Jew - A. Zilber; an electrician who was very trustworthy and cooperative. He was the only Jewish expert who had escaped liquidation and was preserved almost like a showpiece. I summoned him and told him that I was designating the mentioned building as a storage for electrical equipment and that he would be exclusively responsible for the whole building. I ordered that an appropriate billboard be hung at the entrance doors and told him he could locate someone in the attic quarters to serve as a watchman against theft. The electrician surmised whom I had in mind. He fulfilled my orders well and served as a good liaison between the "arrested" rabbi and the outside world.

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

One day at the end of August 1942 my wife phoned me to come home because some high officer of an unknown army had arrived in front of my home in an elegant car and wanted to have an important but private talk with me. At home I found a Hungarian Colonel who told me that on the authorization of the Minister of Defense in Budapest he has a certain mission to perform but that he would talk about this to me "only eye to eye."

When we were alone the Colonel asked me whether I could point out to him the dwelling of the rabbi of Belz and arrange for a talk with him. For a minute I remained silent. The thought flashed through my mind that this was a bit of Gestapo provocation and that the end had come for both the rabbi and myself. Finally, I answered that I know of no rabbi and do not know if any such person resides in the city. However, I did say that I could name a person who could possibly know of such things and perhaps this person could contact him with the rabbi.

In a few days the electrician notified me that the rabbi asks 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 the Hungarian Jews through this colonel -, he was supplied with money and food to the extent that he told me that I no longer needed to provide him with food. We sincerely bade each other farewell not realizing that this was our last meeting.

Not long after that the electrician brought me the news that at night two Gestapo officers had taken the rabbi into a car and out of the city - where he did not know. For a few months I was confronted by the riddle as to whether the rabbi had been liquidated by the Gestapo or taken away so that his life could be spared. The mystery was clarified when one autumn evening in 1943 an elegant lady in whom I recognized the rabbi's sister or cousin visited me. From her I learned that the Rabbi had been taken to Bokhnia near Cracow where he still resided - but that recently his stay there was becoming dangerous and that he would like to return to Peremyshlany under my guardianship. I explained to her that this was impossible, that the Ghetto had been liquidated some time ago, that all of the living quarters were occupied, and that the trustworthy repairman shared the fate of all other Jews. I advised her that with the help of the Hungarian Jews the rabbi be taken to Hungary. She was satisfied with this advice and said that she would try to act accordingly.

A few years later I received news from Israel that the Great Rabbi had successfully made the trip from Bokhnia to Budapest and from there to the "Promised Land" - independent Israel. I, after a great deal of danger, found myself in free Canada.