From Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust by Yaffa Eliach. Reprinted with permission of the author.

The Merit of a Young Priest

It was June 1942; the murder of Jews in the Cracow Ghetto was at its height. About 5,000 victims were deported to the Belzec death camp. Hundres were being murdered in the ghetto itself, shot on its streets on the way to deportation. Among them were Dr. Arthur Rosenzweig, head of the Judenrat, the famous Yiddish poet Mordechai Gebirtig, and the distinguished old artist, Abraham Neumann.

The Hiller family realized that their days in the Cracow ghetto were numbered; they too would soon be swept away in one of the frequent Aktions. Yet there was still a glimmer of hope. They were young and skilled laborers; if they were deported to a labor camp, perhaps they would still have a chance of survival. But the fate of their little son Shachne was a differ­ ent matter. Small children had become a rare sight in the ghetto; starvation, disease, and the ever-increasing selections took their constant toll. Helen and Moses Hiller began feverishly to plan the rescue of their little Shachne. After considering various possibilities they decided to contact family friends on the Aryan side in the small town of Dombrowa, childless Gentile people named Yachowitch.

Helen Hiller, with the help of the Jewish underground, made her way to Dombrowa. She went to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Yachowitch and begged them to take care of her little son. Al­ though they could do so only at great risk to their own lives, the Christian friends agreed to take the child.

Despite the ever-increasing dangers of the ghetto, the young parents could not bring them­ selves to part from their only child. Only after the large Aktion of October 28, 1942, when 6,000 additional Jews were shipped to Belzec and the patients at the Jewish hospital, the residents of the old-age home, and 300 children at the orphanage were murdered on the spot, did the Hiller family decide to act.

On November 15, 1942, Helen Hiller smuggled her little boy out of the ghetto. Along with her son, she gave her Christian friends two large envelopes. One envelope contained all the Hillers' previous valuables; the other, letters and a will. One of the letters was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Yachowitch, entrusting them with little Shachne, and asking them to bring up the child as a Jew and to return him to his people in case of his parents' death. The Hillers thanked the Yachowitch family for their humanitarian act and promised to reward them for their good­ ness. The letter also included the names and address of relatives in Montreal and Washing­ ton, D.C.

The second letter was addressed to Shachne himself, telling him how much his parents loved him, that it was this love that had prompted them to leave him alone with strangers, good and noble people. They told him of his Jewishness and how they hoped that he would grow up to be a man proud of his Jewish heritage.

The third letter contained a will written by Helen's mother, Mrs. Reizel Wurtzel. It was ad­ dressed to her sister-in-law Jenny Berger in Washington. She wrote to her of the horrible conditions in the ghetto, the deportations, the death of family members, and of the impending doom. "Our grandson, by the name of Shachne Hiller, born on the 181 day of Av, August 22, 1940, was given to good people. I beg you, if none of us will return, take the child to you; bring him up righteously. Reward the good people for their efforts and may God grant life to the parents of the child. Regards and kisses, your sister, Reizel Wurtzel."

As Helen was handing the letters to Mrs. Yachowitch, she once more stated her instruc­ tions: "If I or my husband do not return when this madness is over, please mail this letter to America to our relatives. They will surely respond and take the child. Regardless of the fates of my husband or myself, I want my son to grow up as a Jew." The two women embraced and Mrs. Yachowitch promised that she would do her best. The young mother hurriedly kissed her little child and left, fearing that her emotions would betray her and she would not be able to leave her little son behind in this strange house, but, instead, would take him back with her to the ghetto.

It was a beautiful autumn day. The Vistula's waters reflected the foliage of a Polish autumn. The Wavel, the ancient castle of the Polish kings, looked as majestic as ever. Mothers strolled with their children and she, the young Jewish mother, was trying to hold back her tears. She slowed her hasty, nervous steps so as not to betray herself and changed her hurried pace to a leisurely stroll, as if she too were out to enjoy the sights of ancient Cracow. To thwart all suspicion, Helen displayed a huge cross hanging around her neck and stepped in for a mo­ ment to the Holy Virgin Church in the Old Square.

Smuggling little Shachne out from the ghetto to the Aryan side was indeed timely. In March 1943, the Cracow ghetto was liquidated. People in the work camp adjacent to the ghetto were transferred to nearby Plaszow and to the more distant Auschwitz. Anyone found hiding was shot on the spot. Cracow, the first Jewish settlement on Polish soil, dating back to the thir­ teenth century, was Judenrein!

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Yachowitch constantly inquired about the boy's young parents. Even­ tually they learned that the Hillers had shared the fate of most of Cracow's Jews. Both of them were consumed by the flames of the Holocaust. The Yachowitches, too, faced many perilous days. They moved to a new home in a differ­ ent town. From time to time, they had to hide in barns and haystacks. When little Shachne suffered from one of his crying spells, calling for his mother and father, they feared that un­ friendly, suspicious neighbors would betray them to the Gestapo. But time is the greatest healer. Little Shachne stopped crying. Mrs. Yachowitch became very attached to the child and loved him like her own. She took great pride in her "son" and loved him dearly. His big, bright, wise eyes were always alert and inquiring. She and little Shachne never missed a Sunday service and he soon knew by heart all the church hymns. A devout Catholic herself, Mrs. Yachowitch decided to baptize the child and, indeed, make him into a full-fledged Catholic.

She went to see a young, newly ordained parish priest who had a reputation for being wise and trustworthy. Mrs. Yachowitch revealed to him her secret about the true identity of the little boy who was entrusted to her and her husband, Joseph, and told him of her wish to have him baptized so that he might become a true Christian and a devout Catholic like herself. The young priest listened intently to the woman's story. When she finished her tale, he asked, "And what was the parents' wish when they entrusted their only child to you and your husband?" Mrs. Yachowitch told the priest about the letters and the mother's last request that the child be told of his Jewish origins and returned to his people in the event of the parents' death.

The young priest explained to Mrs. Yachowitch that it would be unfair to baptize the child while there was still hope that the relatives of the child might take him. He did not perform the ceremony. This was in 1946.

Some time later, Mr. Yachowitch mailed the letters to the United States and Canada. Both Jenny Berger, from Washington, D. C., and Mr. and Mrs. H. Aron from Montreal responded, stating their readiness to bring the child to the U.S.A. and Canada immediately. But then a legal battle began on both sides of the Atlantic that was to last for four years! Polish law forbade Polish orphan children to leave the country. The immigration laws of the United States and Canada were strict, and no visa was issued to little Shachne. Finally, in 1949, the Cana­ dian Jewish Congress obtained permission from the Canadian Government to bring 1,210 orphans to the country. It was arranged for Shachne to be included in this group, the only one in the group to come directly from Poland. Meantime a court action was instituted in Cracow, and Shachne was awarded, by a judge in Poland, to the representatives of the Canadian American relatives.

In June 1949, Shachne Hiller boarded the Polish liner MS Batory. The parting from Mrs. Yachowitch was a painful one. Both cried, but Mrs. Yachowitch comforted little Shachne that it was the will of his real mother that one day he should be returned to his own people.

On July 3, 1949, the Batory arrived at Pier 88 at the foot of West 48th Street in New York City. Aboard was little Shachne, first-class passenger of cabin No. 228. He was met by his relatives, Mrs. Berger and Mrs. Aron. For the next year, Shachne lived in Montreal. On De­ cember 19, 1950, after two years of lobbying by Jenny Berger, President Harry S. Truman signed a bill into law making Shachne Hiller a ward of the Berger family. When Shachne arrived at the Bergs' home on Friday, February 9, 1951, there was a front-page story in the Washington Post.

It was more than eight years since Shachne's maternal grandmother Reizel Wurtzel, in the ghetto of Cracow, had written the letter to her sister-in-law {his great aunt) Jenny Berger, asking her to take her little grandson to her home and heart. Her will and testament were finally carried out.

Years passed. Young Shachne was educated in American universities and grew up to be a successful man, vice-president of a company, as well as an observant Jew. The bond be­ tween him and Mrs. Yachowitch was a lasting one. They corresponded, and both Shachne and his great aunt Jenny Berger continually sent her parcels and money, and tried as much as possible to comfort her in her old age. He preferred not to discuss the Holocaust with his wife, twin sons, family, or friends. Yet all of them knew about the wonderful Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Yachowitch who saved the life of a Jewish child and made sure to return him to his people.

In October 1978, Shachne, now Stanley, received a letter from Mrs. Yachowitch. In it she revealed to him, for the first time, her inclination to baptize him and raise him as a Catholic. She also went on to describe, at length, her meeting with the young parish priest on that fateful day. Indeed, that young parish priest was none other than the man who became Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Cracow, and, on October 16, 1978, was elected by the College of Cardinals as Pope-Pope John Paul II!

When the Grand Rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, heard the above story, he said, "God has mysterious, wonderful ways unknown to men. Perhaps it was the merit of saving a single Jewish soul that brought about his election as Pope. It is a story that must be told."

Based upon several of my conversations with Shachne Hiller (Stanley Berger), his family, and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Anne Wolozin. September 1977-0ctober 1, 1981. (Yaffa Eliach)

Making Connections

1. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum designated Memories of Courage as the theme for the 2002 Days of Remembrance, our nation's annual commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust. What memories of courage have you witnessed or learned about in your lifetime? For example, several years ago, in Billings, Montana, the entire town put menorahs in their windows at Hanukkah to show solidarity with their Jewish neighbors and to send a message to the neo-Nazis in their area who had been trying to divide the community. Create a tribute to a person or community who has displayed courage and compassion in the face of overwhelming odds.

2. With others in your class, create a traveling exhibit to recognize these individuals, their choices, and their actions.

3. Create an advertisement campaign to remind students your age that you do have the power and choice to make a difference and fight prejudice and oppression.

4. Hold a panel discussion on the topic "The Courage to Care." Why do some stand up and others stand by? Research more information on Pope John Paul II and his relationship to Jews of the Holocaust.

5. Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat responsible for saving the lives of at least 20,000

Hungarian Jews, disappeared after the war. Some evidence suggests that he was arrested by the Soviet secret police and held in captivity until his death. Unfortunately, in today's world, people are being unjustly incarcerated. Write to Amnesty International USA to find out what you can do to help.