

One Moonless Night

By Chayah Sarah Cantor

Fifty years ago, Nathan Bamberger waited on the deck of a Swedish port clutching a *Hjemrejsepapierer*, or Swedish ration booklet. It had been issued to him when he first emerged, along with his family and other terrified Danish Jews, from the belly of a fishing trawler. Now he and his family and friends were going home. But first they had to return to the Swedish government any rations - bread, milk, sugar - they had not used during their stay.

It was a minor nuisance. During their flight out of Denmark, these Jews had literally left with only the shirts on their backs. Now they were returning to their country, lives intact, while millions had perished in the flames of the Holocaust.

Meeting Rabbi Dr. Nathan Bamberger for the first time leaves you struck by his mixture of Jewish piety and Old World elegance. Tall and portly, Bamberger exudes avuncular warmth and refinement. His credentials bespeak his many achievements: author of *The Viking Jews*, ordained at Yeshiva University, rabbi of Kingsbridge

Heights Jewish Center in the Bronx.

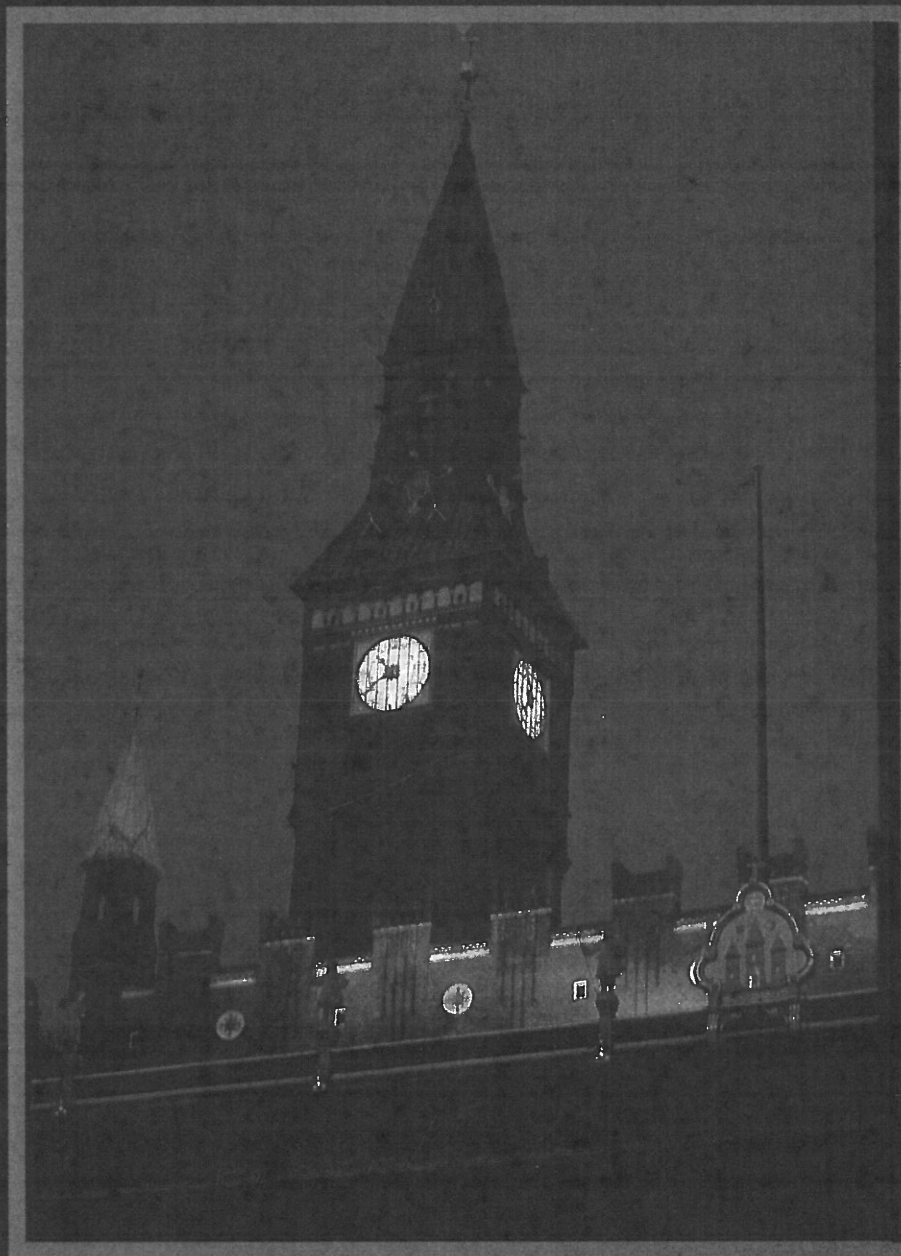
His lectures about life during the war, laced with dry wit, leave listeners awed at the courage and human spirit exhibited in the face of overwhelming evil. His primary topic, the rescue of Denmark's Jews by the

exploits. To them, that epoch is over, done with, finished. But this modesty further demonstrates the specialness of the Danish people, and it is a story that must be told to remind humanity how it is possible to face up to tyranny and triumph.

May 7th marked the 50th anniversary of V-E day, when Germany was defeated after six and a half years of world war. As many as six million Jews lay dead in heaps or ashes all along the charnel house of Europe. Liberating the camps, American GI's and Russian soldiers found the grounds littered with corpses and the barracks filled with dazed survivors.

While the rest of occupied Europe (with the exception of Finland, Holland, and Bulgaria) quietly bowed to Nazi decrees and even assisted in carrying them out, the Danes poured their efforts into resistance and sabotage. Overnight

these quiet and easy-going people transformed into fighters and made the story of wartime Denmark, to quote Dr. Bamberger, a "disaster" for the Germans. This defiance peaked in Autumn 1943. When news of the impending deportation



Danes, remains a uniquely uplifting chapter of the Holocaust - when a nation of non-Jews rose as one to save their Jewish friends and neighbors.

The Danes, say Dr. Bamberger, do not like to talk about their



of the nation's Jews reached the Danish underground, the entire population – men, women, and children – helped ferry the Jewish population to safety in neutral Sweden. Nathan Bamberger will never forget the experience, nor does he tire of telling his story.

World War II came unexpectedly to Denmark. Until April 9, 1940, the tiny nation had remained neutral, but Hitler invaded on that date with the goals of achieving access to Norway and establishing a bulwark against British warships.

There was no warning. The Danes awoke that morning to the sound of German planes circling overhead, and found tanks rolling through Copenhagen. Strewn along the streets were green leaflets the visitors had distributed, proclaiming in awkward Danish that Germany was assuming the “protection” of Denmark. German soldiers quickly posted themselves at all the major buildings, and the Wehrmacht seized control of every major road.

Dr. Bamberger recalls how on the way to



Capture and rescue

Top: A roundup of Jews in Copenhagen on October 2, 1943. Those who were caught were put in the truck at center. **Inset:** Nathan Bamberger in Sweden in 1943. **Previous page:** Copenhagen's Town Hall (photo courtesy of the Danish Tourist Board).

school he encountered the stern faces of the Germans and the dazed countenances of his fellow Danes, many of whom were hurrying home with rolls of black paper to darken their windows in case of aerial attack.

The Danes might have become demoralized if not for their leader, King Christian X, a truly righteous gentile. This “beacon of strength,” as Bamberger calls him, treated the Germans with frosty courtesy, and during his people's five-year ordeal of enemy occupation rallied them to act in like manner.

Bamberger tells how Hitler sent greetings to King Christian on the latter's 75th birthday. The Nazi leader

expressed his wish that the two nations someday would be united. “What a wonderful idea,” the monarch replied. “But frankly, I'm too old to rule over Germany.”

Although the story of King Christian's wearing a yellow star to show his



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. LEO GOLDBERGER

support for the Jews is legend rather than fact, it does convey his attitude toward all Danish citizens. As the ruler of a nation with a long tradition of democracy and tolerance, Christian considered any citizen of Denmark a Dane, regardless of religion, and so did not permit any harassment of the nation's Jews.

Fortunately the Jews of Denmark had an additional factor in their favor: the nation's uniquely favored status with the Nazis. Hitler considered the Danes an Aryan people and granted them a certain degree of autonomy. Until late in the war Denmark continued to govern her internal affairs. The Danish parliament remained intact, as did the army and civil service. Other than petty acts of resistance - such as pouring sugar down German tanks or failing to salute a German officer - the Danes adjusted.

Jewish life, too, returned to normal after the early moments of



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DANISH TOURIST BOARD

Righteous gentiles

Top: King Christian refuses to acknowledge the salute of German soldiers. Christian's open defiance of the occupiers inspired his people to passive resistance.

Inset: Nathan Bamberger's family arrived in Helsingborg, across the Oresund from Denmark. They lived in Mamlo for the duration of the war.

occupation. Schools, synagogues, and shops remained open, and the Sabbath and holidays were freely - albeit discreetly - celebrated. On Succos, Dr. Bamberger's father, an antiques dealer, was able to bless the *lulav* and *esrog*, imported from Yugoslavia or Italy. (Ironically he couldn't get hold of these later, in neutral Sweden.) Zionist youth organizations met, women's auxiliary groups visited the sick, and other communal institutions continued to conduct business as usual.

These "Viking Jews" went through the early years of the war unmolested. Dr. Bamberger mentions the Nazi Danish newspaper *Faedrelandet* (Fatherland), "which we bought simply for a laugh, to see whose face graced the cover." The greatest acts of harassment were probably the painted swastikas on the synagogues.

Denmark's fate changed dramatically in mid-1943. As Germany found herself losing the war, the Danes grew openly defiant. The Danish underground made its debut and developed into a highly sophisticated network, with its own intelligence and communications, and weapons smuggled in by the



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Safety in Sweden

Some of the 5,800 Jews who fled Denmark register in Sweden in October 1943.

British. Scarcely a day went by without some act of sabotage, a bridge or depot blown up with civilian support and participation.

Nathan Bamberger recalls that at age fifteen he went to work at a jewelry store which was a front for the resistance, and helped dynamite a railroad. But for their courage the Danes paid a bitter price: in the ensuing Nazi retaliation, the number of arrests and executions increased. Throughout that summer, strikes and shortages crippled the nation.

On August 29, 1943, German and Danish leaders openly came to blows. The non-ideological German commissioner of Denmark was replaced with a full-fledged Nazi, Werner Best. The Germans declared martial law in September. The king was imprisoned in his castle, the parliament was dissolved, and the Danish military was dis-

Homecoming

In June 1945, the synagogue in Copenhagen was rededicated in a ceremony attended by government and church officials. Chief Rabbi Max Friediger (left) and Cantor Eugene Goldberger hold the Torah scrolls, which had been kept in safety by the Danes. Rabbi Friediger had recently been released from Theresienstadt.

banded. During a two-week period Gestapo leaders ran wild, arresting underground leaders. Now that Germany had complete governmental control, the SS was free to implement plans for deportation of the Jews. The Final Solution was about to arrive in Denmark.

However, a German shipping agent, Georg Duckwith, got wind of the Nazi plan to deport Danish Jewry and alerted the Social Democrats, the country's pre-eminent political party before the war. They in turn contacted the Danish underground, and the wheels for escape were set in motion.

Most of the Jews of Denmark had no knowledge of the fate befalling their brethren in the rest of Europe. They certainly knew about the ghettos in the east, and even sent food parcels there. But of the death camps they were ignorant. Now, caught in the cross-fire between the Germans and the Danes, they worried over their own future.

That September, the Chief Rabbi of Denmark, Max Friediger, was arrested and sent to Horesod, a detention center and transit point to the concentration camps of the east. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, as the Jews gathered for prayers, Marcus Melchior, the principal of the Jewish school and the acting rabbi, instructed his followers to stay indoors during the holiday. They complied, having already heard rumors of an impending *Aktion*, or

PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. LEO GOLDBERGER



roundup. (The Germans knew they could operate best on the Sabbath and holidays, when the Jews were most likely to be gathered together.)

Dr. Bamberger's family locked up their house immediately, leaving the table set for the Rosh Hashanah meal. They went to stay with a Christian friend and merchant, Einar Lerche, who lived in Gothersgade, a Copenhagen neighborhood. From a window on the second-floor, where the Bambergers - parents, brothers, and a sister - had settled in, they could observe the street traffic below.

Inside the townhouse the atmosphere reeked of tension. The Bambergers feared stepping outside for even a moment, lest anyone give them away or they encounter a German officer. "We remained inside for six days," Bamberger recalls, "even staying in for Shabbat Shuvah," the special Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

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Building a life

The supervisor of Stockholm's home for children is surrounded by his charges, Danish Jewish children. Eventually three Jewish schools were opened in Sweden for the Danish guests.

Although his father remained uncertain what to do, Nathan's mother took charge. Declaring: "We can't stay here any longer, it is not safe," she contacted an underground member on Monday. The man told her, "At six p.m., you and your family are to meet downstairs. A car will stop in front. Get in. Do not say a word."

That evening a stranger knocked at the door. He told the Bambergers that it was time to go. Silently the stranger led the family outside to a car; another stranger was at the wheel. The car crept through Copenhagen in the heavy early-evening traffic, which allowed it to blend in. A lone car late at night, past curfew, would surely

have attracted attention.

Their destination was Sletten, a few kilometers north of the capital. From Sletten they were driven into the Danish countryside, where a farmer awaited them. He led them to a barn, which was filled with over 200 equally dazed Jews, all of them waiting and wondering. They were still decked in their holiday finery, and had no food or money - not even warm coats. They remained there two days. On Thursday night, Nathan's mother again took charge. "Tonight we must get to Sweden," she announced.

The neutral country lay temptingly just across the Oresund - the strait dividing the North Sea from the Baltic - a six-hour boat trip. The night was moonless, providing the total darkness necessary for escape.

Sweden, although neutral, had until recently been forced to allow Germany passage to Finland, which was fighting with Germany against Russia. Sweden had accepted the arrangement reluctantly, but with German defeat imminent, it had ended the courtesy. Now that the German military no longer moved through Swedish territory, the Danish fishermen who were ferrying the Jews had open waters in which to operate.

Nevertheless, German patrols prowled the Danish soil and shores. Quickly the Jews were led out of the barn and taken to a waiting vehicle - a pick-up truck normally used for farm animals. "How do you think it feels to ride in the back, covered with hay, barely able to move, barely able to breathe?" Dr. Bamberger asks. "This was our situation that moonless night." They slipped by small farms and villages and approached the sandy dunes of the shore.

The escapees were deposited at an area already filled with other people, who huddled, shivering, wondering what would become of them. Suddenly a crew of rowboats pulled up to the shore and ushered the Jews aboard. Crouched in the shadows, the silhouettes of Danish underground figures watched every move.

Dr. Bamberger recalls how the waves rocked the rowboats and the fierce winds nipped at the passengers' terrified faces. The boats pulled astride a line of larger boats - Danish fishing trawlers. Sailors leaped onto the rowboats and helped the Jews board the trawlers. Nathan and his family were led into the cavernous hull.

Dr. Bamberger describes the atmosphere on the trawler. "Have you ever had cod liver oil?" he asks, referring to that famous spoonful of Vitamin D his generation ingested as children. Those who did never forgot the

taste - or the awful smell. It was the smell which permeated the bottom of those fishing boats - an odor combined with stale motor oil and dried seaweed.

The captain ordered the Jews not to speak and to keep their children quiet. By midnight all 200 Jews were on board. Most crowded together on the bottom deck and covered themselves with tarpaulin.

To their dismay the engine refused to turn over. Unable to return to shore in dread of the German patrols, yet fearing the torpedo boats that prowled the waters, the trawlers were sitting ducks. "While the men worked desperately to get the engine moving," says Bamberger, "every passenger on that boat joined in prayer as we beseeched the A-mighty for mercy." One hour later, the engine spluttered, then roared to life.

Slowly the boat zigzagged along the coast, so that it appeared to be fishing. Two hours later it began to cross into Swedish waters. The human cargo was pressed under the tarpaulin, stomachs churning, noses inhaling the stench. Soon the wood boards grew greasy with water and vomit.

The children slept through much of the ordeal. Most had been drugged to prevent them from crying. Nevertheless, the passengers trembled. Whenever lights from the German patrol boats filtered through the tarpaulin, the Jews froze in terror. Soon, however, different lights beamed. These came from Swedish torpedo boats, which had been instructed to accept people fleeing Denmark.

The Jews were taken south past Hven, an island in Swedish territory. They transferred to the Swedish torpedo boats, and were brought back north to Helsingborg. From there they were taken to a little village called Ramlosa.

The Bambergers arrived in Ramlosa on Yom Kippur Eve and were met by a Swedish delegate and taken to a convalescent hotel which had been converted into a refugee center. The Swedes already had their hands busy at the center, for the place was packed with Jews along with a sprinkling of gentile Danes. (Eventually 12,000 non-Jewish Danes, mostly resistance members, were rescued in the same manner.) Families huddled together in the vast, barren hall, wondering where they would go next and who would help them. Most had gone several hours without food.

The timing - *erev* Yom Kippur - made this quick provision of shelter a mixed blessing: the Jews were told they could not leave the hotel until everyone was registered and assigned a place to live. There was no syna-

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gogue in Ramlosa, and the Bambergers and their friends approached the Day of Awe without kosher food or a place to pray.

Dr. Bamberger's father made plans to walk the next day to Helsinborg, the nearest town that had a synagogue. When morning came, he, his two sons - Nathan and Bjorn - and two friends stealthily walked the five miles in order to get there. Ironically, they had worshipped freely in Nazi Denmark; here, for wanting to pray, they were criminals because they had illegally left the hotel.

During *musaf*, the high point of the day's prayers, the Swedish police barged in and ordered the Danish refugees back to their hotel. But Dr. Bamberger's father would not budge, and the family remained until nightfall, at which time they made the long trek back. They found the hotel surrounded by policemen, who barred them entrance. Only after a long hassle and a verbal dressing down were they allowed to reunite with their mother and sister. There was one condition: they had to leave the camp immediately, else they would be relocated to Haparanda, a frigid city above the Arctic Circle.

The Bambergers left the hotel that night with no money, food, or clothing. Nathan's parents borrowed a few kroner and they arrived at Malmo, a city across the strait from Copenhagen. There, in view but out of reach of their home city, they lived for the next twenty months.

Despite this one bitter incident, Dr. Bamberger insists the Swedes treated them in an exemplary manner. Sweden considered the Jews guests rather than refugees, and the government even lent them money to support them during their stay. (Sweden later excused the loans made to the Danish Jews.)

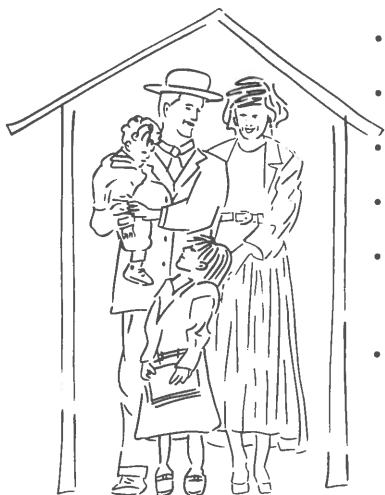
The Bambergers remained in Sweden for the duration of the war, running a small kosher grocery store and involving themselves in local Jewish life. The rabbi of Malmo, Eli Berlinger, helped provide the Danish Jews of the town with food, clothing, shelter, and jobs.

It was in Sweden that the Bambergers and other Danish Jews had their first true encounter with Hitler's Final Solution, and an inkling of what they themselves had barely missed. Wishing to incur favor with the western powers, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler had arranged, through Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte, the transport of prisoners to Sweden for medical care and convalescence. In early 1945, boatloads began to arrive, after the evacuation of Auschwitz and other concentration camps.

Dirty, skeletal human beings lay moaning

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on stretchers or on the ground. Many died from the food, which their shrunken stomachs could not digest. Some finally regained their strength and looks, thanks to the efforts of the local Jewish communities. One native of Poland eventually became Dr. Bamberger's brother-in-law.

Dr. Bamberger notes that of Denmark's almost 6,300 Jews, about 470 were captured and sent to Theresienstadt, in Czechoslovakia. More than 400 survived, and those who died succumbed to old age or illness; they were not sent to Auschwitz with other Theresienstadt inmates.

The Danes kept tabs on their imprisoned citizens, forcing the Nazis to account for their condition. The Danish Red Cross regularly visited the Danish prisoners in Theresienstadt and supplied them with food and medicine. The Danish Jews remained in Theresienstadt, free of the danger of being transferred east, and inhabited a separate, cleaner area. Once they assembled for a visit from a Danish official, who issued them passports and assured them, "You have nothing to fear. You are under the personal protection of Denmark."

In May 1945 the Bambergers bid goodbye to Sweden and returned to Denmark. Cheering crowds and a band greeted them in Copenhagen. Parades poured through the streets, celebrating the Allied victory.

After the warm welcome, the Bambergers found a bigger surprise upon their return home. During their eighteen-month absence, their neighbors had insured that their home was neither robbed nor vandalized. Everything remained exactly as it had been left. Upon entering their apartment, the Bambergers found the dining room table still set for Rosh Hashanah, as it had been the day they took refuge with their Christian neighbor. The holiday china lay on the table. The candlesticks still had candles in them. "The potatoes in the pantry, however," he jokes, "had grown and become a rain forest."

The Danes had also kept the Jewish synagogue and cemetery free from ravagement. The Bamberger family's antique shop still contained its treasures; not one item had been touched.

Two weeks later religious services resumed at their synagogue, where Jewish songs mixed with the strains of the Danish anthem. "My friends and I stood there," recalls Dr. Bamberger, "praying in a daze, as if we had just awoken from a very bad dream." It was a miracle, one only the Jews of Denmark had experienced. This appreciation rose to its height when the congregation, in unison, recited the ancient words

"shehecheyanu v'kiyemanu v'higianu lazman hazeh - who has renewed us, established us, and brought us to this season." G-d had truly granted Danish Jewry a memorable season.

After listening to Nathan Bamberger, one can't help but wonder: why did the Danes do it? Why did they act so nobly, committing themselves wholeheartedly to the rescue of a tiny and negligible population? Was it simple humanitarianism, or a desire to spite the Germans? And why didn't other nations act with such solidarity? Are the Danes intrinsically different than other Europeans?

Dr. Bamberger answers the last question with an emphatic yes. The Danes have always been blessed with an altruistic spirit, deeply rooted in their commitment to democracy, mutual cooperation, and religious tolerance. Quoting a Danish expression, "Keeping two feet on the ground is the best one can hope for," he points out the basic mentality of the Danes, who differed greatly from the Germans, in spite of Hitler's belief that they were fellow Aryans.

"The Scandinavians are a Nordic people," he says. "Their tastes are far more modest than the Germans' - good food, good beer. They don't crave anything else."

He elaborates on the Danish concept of "coziness," which parallels our much-touted "family values" - community, solidarity, and above all, tradition. This translates as fierce loyalty to their friends.

"A Dane will never turn on you," he insists. "As long as you are his friend, he will remain your friend for life. He will do anything to help you."

After the war, Nathan Bamberger, by now eighteen, longed to go to Palestine to continue his studies. But the British were turning the Jews away, and so he went to Baltimore, home of the famous Yeshiva Ner Israel. He pursued both rabbinic and doctoral programs at Yeshiva University in New York, where he currently resides. He now devotes his time to the Kingsbridge Heights Jewish Center in the Bronx, once a family Jewish center, now a small *minyán*. He has also recorded the history of Danish Jewry in his book *The Viking Jews*, published by Soncino.

From time to time Dr. Bamberger returns to Denmark, to visit the land of his birth and to pay homage to the country that saved his life. This gratitude partly explains why he feels obligated to tell the story again and again. Yet there is another reason for his desire to lecture: to tell what came to an end in Europe fifty years ago, and what the human spirit, when it chose to act, was able to rescue. ♦

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EDITOR'S viewpoint

The celebration of V-E Day and the liberation of the concentration camps has resulted in accelerated media coverage concerning the Holocaust and its aftermath.

B'nai B'rith International's Jewish Monthly joined the flood of articles with "The Rescuer's Story: A Righteous Gentile Marries the Woman He Saved," by Deborah Kaye, published in the April issue. The story is a powerful and moving account of how John Damski, a Catholic Pole, risked his life repeatedly to save imperiled Jews. Here was a Schindler who acted with no profit motive. According to Kaye, he rescued Jews by taking them from the Warsaw Ghetto to fill positions at the airfield where he was employed.

Damski's primary rescue was of Sara Rozen, for whom he secured a phony birth certificate under the name Krystyna Zofia Paderewska. Using this identity, Sara passed as a non-Jew, and worked with John to help anti-Nazis, including the Polish government-in-exile. As they spent more time together, their relationship became personal. Sara's husband had been killed during the war, and in 1943 she and John were married. At the time theirs was more a union of convenience - it enabled Sara to pass more easily - but after the war the two reaffirmed their vows. They moved to the United States and Sara, now using her borrowed name, became Christine. John and Christine established a life in America and raised their daughter Eva as a Catholic.

John Damski is truly a righteous gentile, a hero who exhibited astonishing bravado in the face of a ruthless enemy. Sara, or Christine, is also a hero of sorts. She too battled Nazism, and her actions merit our praise.

And yet this story is a tragedy. Intermarriage ranks behind only apostasy in signifying divorce from the Jewish people - a tough pill to swallow in a century that celebrates physical love above all, but an eternal truth regardless. Spiritual holocaust exceeds physical holocaust, and the Damski marriage was nothing less than a spiritual realization of Hitler's goal - the eradication of the Jewish people.

The astonishing part is that the article makes absolutely no moral statement concerning the Damski marriage. It is as if the issue of intermarriage has ceased to exist. There can be a larger tragedy than sin, and that is when the

conception of sin has been lost. It is one thing to lament the high incidence of intermarriage; it is quite another when intermarriage is so rampant (or worse, is condoned) that it has ceased to be a subject for lament. The fact that

SPIRITUAL HOLOCAUST

it no longer merits comment is a further descent into the abyss of a Jewish nation divided in two. Perhaps Deborah Kaye believes that John Damski's heroics somehow make this case special. However, when it comes to intermarriage, Jewish law does not allow for such distinctions.

In the same issue a house ad appears for the B'nai B'rith Foundation. Titled "This child may grow up with no identity" and accompanied by the photo of a baby, it urges readers to guarantee the Jewish consciousness of the next generation with a donation to B'nai B'rith. "With this gift, B'nai B'rith can continue its vital work in communities around the globe, reaching out to Jewish youth and fostering Jewish continuity."

Which message are we to believe? Does B'nai B'rith seek to foster Jewishness or to acquiesce in its destruction? B'nai B'rith does excellent work on many fronts, but it must get its *hashkafah*, its outlook, in order.

The significance of spiritual holocaust was underscored in April by Israel's Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, reacting to a visit to the Jewish state by Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger to commemorate the liberation of the camps. Lustiger, whose given name was Aharon, was sent to Catholic school by his parents in wartime France to save him from the Nazi grasp. At age 14, he voluntarily underwent baptism, and today is a close confidant of the Pope. Rabbi Lau said: "The way in which Aharon Lustiger has chosen to live his life goes hand in hand with the Final Solution." Rabbi Lau's statement captures perfectly the gravity of spiritual holocaust. It is a lesson that neither Sara Rozen nor Aharon Lustiger has absorbed, but one that Jewish media must not ignore. Judgment is left to the Holy One, but one cannot escape the conclusion that Lustiger saved his body but surrendered his soul.

There is one flicker of hope in Sara Rozen's sad story. Her daughter Eva learned of her Judaism, married Jewish, and is raising her children as Jews.

Avraham M. Goldstein

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