**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Ki Sisa 5771**

**Volume 2, Issue #24**

**Chassidic Story #690**

**Reconstruction and Deconstruction**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

**editor@ascentofsafed.com**

In about the year 1800, a fire broke out in the city of Maerkisch-Friedland, where the illustrious Rabbi Akiva Eiger was chief rabbi. A large segment of the Jewish quarter was destroyed as a result of the fire, and many homes had to be rebuilt. Rabbi Akiva Eiger issued a proclamation advising all those planning to rebuild their homes to stipulate in their contracts with the builders that no work was to be performed on Shabbos or Yom Tov.

All members of the community complied with the Rabbi's directive, except for one man, who was the president of the community and its wealthiest member. He wanted his new house built without delay. To this end, he hired workers to do the work non-stop, Shabbos and Yom Tov included. All protestations from the Rabbi and members of the community fell upon

deaf ears.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger himself then announced publicly that he was certain that whoever had his house built on Shabbos would not see it stand for long, yet the work on the rich man's house continued unabated.

The president's new house was not only the first to be completed, but also the largest and most magnificent of the reconstructed buildings. The Jews of the city were appalled by this flagrant display of insubordination to their great rabbi.

However, the episode did not end there. Not long afterward, one of the beams of the president's house suddenly collapsed and crashed to pieces. It was subsequently discovered that the entire wooden frame of the house had become infested with timber-decay, and the building would have to be completely demolished and rebuilt.

The builders and engineers were at a loss to explain why only that particular house became infested, while the other houses built at the same time from the same timber supply remained intact. But to the Jews of Maerkisch-Friedland, there was no doubt as to the answer of this puzzling question.

Source: From the book Toldos Rabbi Akiva Eiger by A.M. Bleichard, who heard it from the sons of R. Eiger. Adapted and translated into English by R. David Ribiat in The Thirty-Nine Melochos (Feldheim), vol.1, p.85.

Connection: Weekly Reading Not to do specific types of work on Shabbat (verse 34:21 and also next week, 35:3)

Biographical note: Rabbi Akiva Eiger [1761 13 Tishrei 1837], the chief rabbi of Posen, Prussia for 23 years, was an acclaimed scholar whose analyses of and innovative insights into the Gemora are studied in nearly all yeshivas.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of KabbalaOnline.org.*

*a project of Ascent of Safed*

[*www.ascentofsafed.com*](http://www.ascentofsafed.com) *ascent@ascentofsafed.com*

**It Once Happened**

**The Chozeh and**

**The Old Man**

The Chozeh interrupted the discussion, and advised them to let the horses' reins go free and let them go where they would.

They did as he said, and they travelled quite a few miles on the road before meeting a peasant who told them that the town which they had reached was not the one they had been searching for. Nevertheless, as Shabbat was quickly approaching, they had to stop over and find some lodging for the night.

At that point the Chozeh announced to his chasidim, "This Shabbat I am not to be known as a rebbe." From this they understood that he wanted to be inconspicuous for some reason of his own. It was also understood that they would be on their own in finding appropriate accommodations.

So, they entered the town and made their way to the synagogue, knowing that, according to time-honored custom, strangers always received an invitation from some villager for the Shabbat meal. Sure enough, they all received invitations, except for the Chozeh who, in his usual fashion prolonged his prayers until all the other congregants had left. There was, however, one very old man who also remained in the shul (synagogue) and sat singing the traditional Shabbat tunes.

The old man noticed the stranger and asked him, "Where will you be having your meal?"

The Chozeh replied, "I don't know yet."

"Well, I would suggest that you have your Shabbat meals in the local inn, and after the Shabbat ends, I will go around and collect the money to pay the bill."

"No," replied the Chozeh, "In that inn, they don't even light Shabbat candles. No, I wouldn't make kiddush (the Shabbat blessing over wine) in such a place."

"Well, I would invite you to my own home, but we really don't have much of anything to eat or drink."

"Don't worry, I don't eat very much, and I don't drink very much either."

"All right, so, you'll come home with me." said the old man, still sitting with his prayer book in his hand. "Tell me, where do you come from?"

"I come from Lublin."

"You don't say! Why, you don't happen to know the tzadik (righteous person), the Chozeh, do you?"

"It so happens that I know him very well. I spend all of my time with him."

The old man's eyes lit up like a fire. "Please, what can you tell me about him?"

"Well, what kind of things do you want to know?" asked the Chozeh.

"To tell you the truth, I have fasted one day every week for years, so that I might merit to set my eyes on the tzadik. You see, many years ago, when he was just a little boy, I was his teacher. In those days he was a regular boy, just like all the rest, nothing special about him.

“But now, I hear he performs miracles and is a great tzadik. Every day when his turn came to read from the prayer-book, he would be missing. And when he would finally turn up, I would always spank him. Then, one day I decided to follow him. I was curious to see where he went all the time. So, I walked a little distance behind him, and followed him into the forest. There, he sat down and cried out from the depths of his heart, 'Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!' From that day on I never spanked him again."

The Chozeh was greatly moved by the old man's recitation, and it was clear to him why G-d had directed his path to this out-of-the-way little village. He revealed to the old man his real identity, and the old man fainted away. After he was revived, the tzadik told him not to reveal to anyone else who he was.

After the end of Shabbat the Chozeh and his followers continued on in the originally intended direction. They arrived at an inn and enjoyed the Melave Malka meal, bidding goodbye to the Shabbat Queen. When they had finished, the Chozeh told them, "Let's return to the village now, for it is time for us to pay our last respects to the old man I stayed with. He has just departed from this world." They returned and said the eulogy for the old man who had such a burning love for tzadikim, that G-d granted him his greatest wish.

*Reprinted from this week’s issue of “L’Chaim” (#1159), a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization of Brooklyn, NY.*

**The Shalom Bayit Kugel**

**By Shoshannah Brombacher**

A husband and wife came to Rabbi Israel of Koznitz (the “Koznitzer Maggid,” 1737–1814). They’d had a big fight and wanted a divorce.

“My wife,” complained the man, “every week she makes for Shabbat a delicious kugel. I love that kugel! All week I work and shlep, just for that kugel! When I just think of that kugel, my mouth starts watering . . .

“But what does this foolish woman do to me? She torments me! After I recite the kiddush, do I get the kugel? No-o-o-o. First she serves the gefilte fish. Then the soup. Then the chicken. And the potatoes. Then a couple of other dishes, and then I’m full, I can’t possibly take one more bite. Then she brings in the kugel! Now shouldn’t I divorce her?” And he said a lot more that people normally don’t say in front of a rabbi.

The wife explained that in her parents’ home it was always done this way. She wouldn’t budge.

So the Koznitzer Maggid decided that from now on she should make two kugels. One to be eaten right after kiddush, and one to serve after the fish and the soup and the chicken and the potatoes. The couple left, reconciled.

From that day on, the Koznitzer Maggid always had two kugels at his Shabbat table—one right after kiddush, and another one after the main course. They called it the Shalom Bayit Kugel (“harmony in the home kugel”).

*Reprinted from this week’s email of Chabad.Org Magazine.*

**The Human Side of the Story**

**Silver Lining to the**

**Cloud of Terrorism**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach**

Can some good come from terror?

Perhaps this story, which appears in the new work "Aleinu Leshabeach" of Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein, provides some sort of silver lining for the cloud of terror which darkens the lives of Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

Two Jews were in the final stage of a business deal conducted in the lobby of a hotel. To conclude the deal the prospective buyer had placed a large wad of dollar bills on the table to be handed over as soon as an agreement was signed.

Then came an announcement on the P.A. system that the hotel must be evacuated immediately because of the discovery of an object suspected of being a terrorist bomb. In his haste to run for his life this fellow left the money on the table. When he returned it was gone and all the attempts of the police to find the thief were of no avail.

A day later another Jew who had heard of the incident visited the lobby of that hotel and noticed a large flowerpot standing in a slightly tilted position. When he walked over to investigate he saw a dollar bill sticking out, and when he came even closer he discovered that this was the place where the thief had concealed the stolen money.

After tracking down the victim of this theft and informing him of the good news he was surprised to hear from him that he had already despaired of recovering the money and it was therefore the property of the finder. The finder stubbornly insisted that the money belonged to its original owner and hit on an idea how to break this bizarre impasse.

"Do you have a son?" he asked. "Yes," answered the other, "and he is waiting for me in the car below." Well," continued the finder, "I have a daughter, so how about introducing them!"

This brilliant solution eventually led to a successful shidduch, with the disputed money given to the young couple to help establish their home.

*Reprinted from this week’s Ohr Somayach International website – Ohr.edu*

**The Accusations**

**Are Untrue**

Nicholas sat on his throne. It was during this period that the opponents of Chasidism made terrible accusations against Chasidim which reached even the highest gentile authorities.

One time the Czar was told that the Rizhiner Rebbe considered himself a king, and that he did not recognize the authority of the Russian crown. Incensed, the Czar decided to dispatch an infiltrator to make an investigation.

The infiltrator was a high-ranking officer, a renegade Jew happy to turn informer. Arriving in Rizhin, he asserted that he wanted ask the tzaddik for his blessing for business endeavors. To ingratiate himself with the Chasidim, he bought refreshments. Then he began discussing his business, attacking the government for making laws and restrictions. The infiltrator was surprised that not one voice was raised in his favor. He repeated this performance several times, but each time was met by total silence from his listeners.

One afternoon he was ushered into the Rebbe's room. The spy began to tell the Rebbe how, as a wealthy merchant, he was suffering from the terrible decrees and regulations imposed by the government.

The Rebbe looked deeply at his visitor and said, "I will tell you a story.

In a small village lived a Jewish innkeeper who had an only son named Yossel. Because the village was so isolated, Yossel had no Jewish friends. His best friend was Stepan, the son of the gentile handyman who worked for his father.

Stepan had a quick mind and enjoyed sitting in on the Torah lessons Yossel received. In fact, Stepan was quicker than Yossel to grasp the lessons.

Years passed, and it was time to look for a bride for Yossel. A matchmaker came to the little village to interview him. Stepan sat together with Yossel as the matchmaker questioned him on Jewish topics. Each time a question was posed, however, Yossel was silent, while Stepan supplied the answer. It was clear to the matchmaker that this boy was not a good prospect and he left.

The innkeeper decided to separate his son from Stepan.

After much thought, he decided to send away both father and son. When the handyman heard, he protested: 'Why should I be punished on account of my son? Let him go out into the world.' And so Stepan left the inn.

For many months Stepan went from one study hall to another masquerading as a Jewish orphan and receiving hospitality from Jews wherever he went. Eventually he tired of that life and decided to move to a large city, where he enrolled in a university and excelled in his studies. When he completed his courses he began searching for a good opportunity.

One day, arriving in a very distant city, he heard that the citizens were about to choose a new ruler, something they did every three years. All candidates were to present themselves at the palace where their suitability for kingship would be determined. Stepan rushed to the palace. With his outstanding intelligence he was chosen king.

Soon after his coronation the new king inexplicably began making terrible decrees against the local Jews. The most devastating was that the Jews would have to leave the realm at the end of twelve months!

The Chief Rabbi declared a public fast, during which the people begged G-d to soften the king's heart. On the fourth day, he called a meeting of the seven most prominent members of the community at which he related to them his strange dream. He dreamed that in a faraway land there was a young innkeeper named Yossel who would be able to change the decree of the king. Strangely enough, each man present had had the exact same dream.

Messengers were dispatched at once to bring the innkeeper to their city. They related their strange tale and begged him to accompany them and Yossel agreed. The prominent Jews of the city managed to arrange a meeting with the king, and Yossel was ushered into the royal throne room. Stepan was overjoyed to see his old friend, and they embraced each other warmly.

What is this I am told about the evil decrees you have made against the Jews of this realm? asked Yossel.

I really don't have anything against the Jews, Stepan replied. In fact, they have always treated me very kindly, but as soon as I became king, I felt that I had to make these new decrees. I don't entirely understand why.

The rabbi explained: Your majesty, our Torah teaches that the hearts of kings and rulers are in the hand of G-d. When Jews keep the Torah and do mitzvot, they fare well, but when they rebel against G-d, He hardens the heart of their king and they fall prey to evil decrees. Nonetheless, they do not pray for another king, for they know that it is their own actions that shape their destiny and not the will of the king.

Having concluded his story, the Rizhiner looked into the eyes of the informer and said: Go and tell those who have sent you that the accusations against the Jews are untrue. They are loyal citizens and pray for the welfare of their rulers and the country in which they live.

*Reprinted from this website of Chabad of Bel Aire.*

**Israel Jewish Scene**

**Mazal Tov!:**

**18 Is Not a Crowd**

**By Liat Rotem Melamed**

Rivkah, 44, of Jerusalem gives birth to her 18th baby, who is already an uncle of two and evens out score in household which is now comprised of nine girls and nine boys. 'They came one by one,' she says

When she was young, Rivkah, a Jerusalem resident belonging to the Belz Hasidic movement, never dreamed that at the age of 44 she would be leaving the maternity ward with her 18th child.

It's true that she herself comes from a large family – she has 15 brothers and sisters, but her husband comes from a much smaller family that includes 'only' five kids.

"We didn't make a conscious decision to have 18 children," she says with a smile. "They came one by one - thank G-d."

Incidentally, the new addition to the family was born an uncle. His oldest brother already has two children, which makes Rivkah a proud grandmother. Another point for pride in her family – her 18 children are divided equally between the two sexes: Nine girls and nine boys.

'Quiet? Not here!'

Rivkah knows what it's like to grow up in a big family. Her childhood memories include a lot of noise and mayhem, but also lots of love and a house filled with life. Either way, she stresses, it's a lot easier being a mom today than it was when she was a kid.

"When my mother was raising us, being a mother involved a lot more physical work than it does today," she explained. "I remember how she had to launder and scrub all the diapers by hand. I especially remember piles and piles of laundry on Friday and before the holidays. I have two washing machines that work 24 hours a day; otherwise we wouldn't be able to manage.

"These days raising children isn't about the physical work; it's more about maneuvering between everybody's needs: This one needs an early bedtime, this one needs to read, that one needs his medication. Motherhood has become more of a mental strain than a physical one."

**What does your house look like?**

"Our house is a house filled with mess and noise. If you're looking for a quiet corner – don't look for it here. We have a house filled with life. My mother always used to tell me that cemeteries are quiet and clean, houses with children aren't. Noise is healthy. The children study, play, try all sorts of things together, they have a social life and friends that come over."

Nevertheless, It Can't Be Easy Being

**A Mother to so Many Children.**

"I used to think the more kids you have – the more stressed the parents. Today I see that people who have fewer children are more stressed than me. Children aren't a reason for hardship or anger. It all depends on the person and how much he works on his or her character.

"I believe that you need to get up every morning and thank God for each and every soul he has given us. They are all healthy and whole, and that only gives me strength, it doesn't take it away."

Rivkah wears a very special bracelet on her wrist; it's stamped with the names of her 17 children. The new baby, who as yet has no name, will also be added to the bracelet. And who knows, maybe the last three empty spaces will be filled in the future.

Does your husband help you out with the kids?

Until my eighth was born, I managed by myself, but when we got to eight, my husband saw that I needed help, so he started going to morning prayers even earlier so that he could get home by 7 am. Since then we've been getting the kids ready together every morning.

"My husband is the one who makes the kids' sandwiches every morning; each one gets his or her favorite: Omelet, toast, fruit. It takes him almost an hour. Then the kids have their carpools to school, so that my mornings are usually free because I don't work. My husband's involvement in raising our children is something he saw growing up, and it's the example he has passed on to our sons – a father who is a helpmate and partner."

If you were wondering what kind of car suits a family with 18 children, we can reveal that there isn't one. This family doesn't own a car, since there just isn't one that's big enough. "A car isn't enough for our family – we need a train. We use public transportation to get where we need to go. For my eldest son's wedding we rented a van."

**'Patience Comes with the Baby'**

In contrast to raising the children, which Rivkah says has gotten easier over the years, the pregnancies have become a greater burden with each birth. Not necessarily because of the physical difficulty.

"During the first pregnancies no one scared me by telling me what could happen to the baby, but the older I got and the more children I had, the more stressful it became because those factors increase the likelihood of problems with the baby. This pregnancy, I'm already 44-years-old and the doctors were very concerned due to the statistics, but thankfully, not all children born to older mothers are born with problems."

Did you undergo examinations during the pregnancy to see if there were any problems?

"Of course. Tests taken during the course of the pregnancy are important, not in order to have an abortion if a problem is discovered, but in order for the parents to be prepared before the baby comes."

Since giving birth to her 14th child, Rivkah is very meticulous about getting some rest after each birth. She spends a few days convalescing at a special maternity convalescent home. "After the first two births I stayed with my mother to get some rest, but for the next 12 births I preferred to go home," she explains.

"Then after the 14th birth, I decided to try the convalescent homes, because everyone spoke in favor of getting rest and told me that it rejuvenates. Happily, I found this to be very true."

At the age of 44 and after 18 children, do you have the strength for another baby?

"You don't need strength for the baby. You need strength for the big kids, the teenagers and the married kids. All the patience comes with the baby. I heard someone say that each baby is born with a loaf of bread in his hand, meaning that a baby is born with everything it needs. When the baby is created, love and patience are created with him; otherwise we wouldn't be able to raise them."

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the AJOP (Association for Jewish Outreach Programs) Newsletter. The article originally appeared in the Ynet News.com*

**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Ki Sisa 5770**

**Story #640**

**The Purim Code**

**First-hand Testimony from**

**Rabbi Yaakov-Mordechai Greenwald**

**From the Desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

Since the 1980's the phenomenon of Torah Codes has become both famous and controversial. I, personally, enjoyed the merit of having worked with Rabbi Michoel-Dov Wessmandl, the Torah sage from Hungary known as the Father of Torah Codes. You should know that all his work was done in his head, without computers. He was truly a genius.

Once, in the 1950's, I visited him at His Mt. Kisco NY community in the month of Adar, a short time before Purim. He asked me, “Did I ever tell you how many letters there are in Megilat Esther?”

No, I replied; I have no idea.

**12,196 Letters in Megilat Esther**

Well, I know, he continued. I counted! There are 12,196 letters in it altogether.

So? I inquired. What do we do with this information? Is there significance to this

number?

He smiled. Bring me a Chumash [Five Books of Moses in the original Hebrew], he said. I brought one to him, whereupon he told me:

Starting from the first instance of the letter alef (the third letter in the first word of the Torah ed.), if you count an interval equal to the number of letters in Megilat Esther--12,196--you arrive at a letter samech. If you continue another 12,196 letters you get to a letter tof; and if you keep going for another 12,196 you land on a letter reish. And, of course, alef-samech-tof-reish spells Esther! Is this not amazing?

It certainly is, I answered enthusiastically. And then I added with a grin, but is there a connection to Mordechai too? Otherwise, he'll feel bad.

He looked crestfallen. I don't know. Yet. Try me again next year.

The next Adar I made sure to visit Rabbi Wessmandl again. What about Mordechai? I asked. I also found a hint to Mordechai, he announced. Our sages pointed out that there is a hint to Mordechai in the Torah, where the verse stares, 'You shall take the finest fragrances: 'mor dror' [myrrh]. ['Mor dror' has the same first two syllables as 'Mordechai,' and its Aramaic translation by Onkeles, 'mira dichya,' has the same consonants in the same order as 'Mordechai.' The verse is Exodus 30:23, which is in the Torah portion that in most years is read in the week in which Purim occurs. (Similarly, in that same Talmudic passage the sages identified a hint to Esther in Deuteronomy 31:18 and to Haman in Genesis 3:11.) ed.]

**Truly Even More Amazing**

He continued: Now, if from the letter mem in mor dror in that verse you count forward the number of letters in the Megilah, you come to a reish. And if you keep counting successively 12,196 letters you will get a dalet and then a chof and then a yud spelling out Mordechai! This is truly even more amazing.

\* \* \*

A number of years ago, a young Jewish woman appeared at our house. She was not observant, but had recently attended an introductory seminar about Judaism. She was a very intelligent and learned person, and her rapid-fire questions had given the rabbis a lot of difficulty. When the seminar ended, they recommended to her to visit me. My wife and I invited her to come one week-night for dinner and to stay over. After the meal we entered into a discussion, at her request. She asked all of her questions, and added that she does not believe that the Torah is from G-d, stating categorically that this is a concept impossible to accept or even grasp.

**Paying close, Un-Blinking Attention**

I told her what Rabbi Weissmandl had showed me about the Esther and Mordechai intervals. She paid close, un-blinking attention. Afterwards she asked to be excused and retired to her room.

The next morning she emerged red-eyed and exhausted looking. I asked her what was the matter. She said that she had been up nearly the entire night on the portable computer which she carried everywhere and had brought with her. Her field was mathematics and computer science, and she had determined to devise a program to calculate the possibility of such a thing occurring naturally. It took many hours, and the inescapable conclusion she was forced to concede was that the odds were so astronomically huge against that it had to be considered impossible.

Many years after the above incidents, after the chupah ceremony at a wedding that I had been invited to, a woman I didn't recognize called out to me by name. Excuse me, I said to her, I don't know you. Who are you?

I am 'Mordechai and Esther' was her surprising reply. I wanted you to see that I cover my hair. I have a husband who is very religious and studies in a Kollel [advanced yeshiva for married students], and we have children that attend yeshiva schools. I thought you would be pleased.

Translated and expanded by Yerachmiel Tilles from Ner l'Shulchan Shabbat #277, as shown to me by Avraham Feivish Stern yesterday on Shushan Purim 5770 in Jerusalem, at the outstanding Purim feast in the house of Yehuda and Shayna Tilles in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Connections (2): Purim and the weekly Torah reading.

Biographical note: Rabbi Chaim Michoel Dov Wessmandl [1903 6 Kislev 1957] made extraordinary but ultimately unsuccessful efforts to save the Jews of Slovakia during the Holocaust. A survivor himself, he subsequently moved to USA and in 1946 founded the Nitra yeshiva in Somerville New Jersey, an attempt to inaugurate a Talmudic agricultural community. He subsequently moved the yeshiva to Mt. Kisco, NY, where it still exists and flourishes. Today he is best known for his pioneering work on Torah Codes in an era before computers.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed* [*www.ascentofsafed.com*](http://www.ascentofsafed.com) *or email* [*ascent@ascentofsafed.com*](http://webmailb.juno.com/webmail/new/5?session_redirect=true&userinfo=eff1e795994608ed6885dfdeac88e827&count=1267639671)

**How Diplomat’s Paperwork**

**Saved Lives in Holocaust**

**By the Associated Press**

The Associated Press reports: It took Ina Polak 35 years to discover the dusty piece of paper that probably saved her and her family in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It wasn’t until she was cleaning her mother’s New York City apartment following her death in 1980 that she discovered the document listing her, her sister and parents. It was a Salvadoran citizenship certificate.

“My first reaction was ‘Oh, now I understand!”’ said Polak, who is 87.

She and her family were Dutch Jews, with nothing to connect them with the distant Central American country of El Salvador. Yet the certificate dated 1944 became their lifeline, thanks to a man named George Mantello.

**A Jew Born in Romania**

Mantello, a Jew born in what is now Romania, was one of a handful of diplomats who during World War II saved thousands of Jews and others on the run from the Nazis by giving them visas or citizenships, often without their governments’ knowledge.

They were men such as Hiram Bingham IV, a U.S. consular official in Marseille, France who issued visas and other travel documents that are credited with helping to rescue about 2,000 people; or Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese envoy in Lithuania, thought to have saved 3,500; or Dr. Feng Shan Ho, the Chinese consul in Vienna whose visas got 18,000 Jews to safety in Shanghai.

Best known of all is Raoul Wallenberg of Sweden, whose efforts probably contributed to saving 90,000 Jewish lives in Hungary before he vanished in what became an abiding mystery of the Holocaust.

**Fresh Attention is Being Directed to the Work of Mantello**

Now the work of Mantello is getting fresh attention as scholars dig into newly released files and piece together the lives he saved by gaming the diplomatic bureaucracy during the Holocaust — the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators in World War II.

Working as first secretary in the Salvadoran consulate in Geneva, Switzerland, Mantello used a network of contacts to issue papers to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe between 1942 and 1944 –up to 10,000 documents, according to his son, Enrico Mantello.

The same figure is given by the late historian David Kranzler in his 2000 book about the diplomat called ”The Man who Stopped the Trains to Auschwitz.” The book also describes Mantello’s critical role in publicizing the so-called Auschwitz Protocol, a description of the Nazis’ biggest death camp by two escaped inmates.

**The Man Who Stopped the Train**

It is not known how many lives were saved by Mantello’s documents — “definitely, hundreds,” says Mordecai Paldiel, a Holocaust studies professor at Yeshiva University in New York. A letter from Carl Lutz, a Swiss diplomat who worked with Mantello, speaks of ”thousands” saved.

Without the Salvadoran certificate, Polak and her family would likely have been worked to death in Bergen-Belsen or sent to other camps or the salt mines. Instead they were moved to a small camp enclosure full of Jews with Latin American documents, and finally put on a train out of Bergen-Belsen along with 2,400 people and were rescued by US troops in April 1945.

**A Paper with the Right Stamp**

**And Signature Could Save a Life**

“Back then,” Polak said, if a German official ‘’saw a paper, and if it had the right stamp on it and the signature, then it was legal. People with these papers were eligible, in the Germans’ eyes, to be sent to a neutral country, to a better camp.”

Mantello sent out notarized copies of the certificates and kept the originals, more than 1,000 of which were found in a suitcase in a Geneva basement in 2005 and donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., by his son three years later.

Now museum researchers are trying to trace recipients of the certificates to get an idea of how many of them actually saved lives and learn the full scope of Mantello’s rescue efforts.

**Diplomats Documents Saved Two**

**Dutch Families from Bergen-Belson**

Judith Cohen, director of photo archives, says she has discovered how two Dutch families were released from Bergen-Belsen in January 1945 thanks to the documents, sent first to Switzerland and then to North Africa to be exchanged for German prisoners.

“We know that Salvadoran certificates actually helped pull someone out of the concentration camp and send them to freedom,” said Cohen. While calling it ”a very small footnote to history,” she notes the Jewish saying that ”he who saves just one person is like he who has saved the whole world.”

In a speech last year, Cohen noted that “even when the rescue attempts were unsuccessful, the mere existence of the certificates proves that people cared for others and tried to extend help to friends under occupation to a greater extent than is commonly acknowledged.”

**Areas Targeted by the Rescuers**

And the areas targeted by the rescuers helps fill in another blank in Holocaust history by indicating “who knew what when” about what was going on under the Nazi thumb, she said.

After the war, Polak, who lives in Eastchester, New York, married a fellow survivor, Jaap Polak. She believes that maybe friends of her father gave Mantello the name of her family.

Her father, Abraham Soep, was a diamond manufacturer in Amsterdam, and probably received the citizenship certificate while the family were in a Dutch transit Nazi camp before being sent to Bergen-Belsen (the same camp where another girl from Holland, the diarist Anne Frank, perished).

**Special Privileges to Holders**

**Of Citizenship Papers**

Citizenship papers entitled their holders to sometimes wear their own clothes instead of prison uniforms and to live in a separate section of Bergen-Belsen.

The difference was critical, said Paul Shapiro, director of the Washington museum’s Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. “Remember that if you were in the wrong part of the camp, you were dead.”

While Wallenberg’s activities were initiated and supported by his government, other diplomats acted against their countries’ immigration policies or interpreted them “very, very, liberally,” says Yeshiva University’s Paldiel, who wrote a book titled “Diplomat Heroes of the Holocaust.”

In her speech, Cohen said diplomats from Portugal and Romania, as well as representatives of the Vatican and the International Red Cross, helped spread Mantello’s documents.

Those who made a sustained effort to save Jews numbered just “a few dozen” out of thousands of diplomats stationed in Europe, says Dr. Rafael Medoff, director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies in Washington, D.C.

**Almost Fell a Victim to the Nazis**

As a Jew, Mantello might himself have easily fallen victim to the Nazis. He had held honorary diplomatic positions for the El Salvador government starting in 1939, and had changed his name from Mandel to the more Spanish-sounding Mantello. But he was arrested by the Germans in Belgrade in 1942. He managed to escape to Geneva where he became first secretary of the Salvadoran consulate, and set about saving fellow Jews.

Col. Jose Arturo Castellanos, the consul general, allowed him to issue the certificates, and only later did his government find out about it. El Salvador wasn’t a neutral country at the time — it was backing the Allies, so Mantello had to use emissaries to distribute the certificates.

According to the Washington museum, copies of the certificates produced by Mantello and his team of Swiss volunteer clerks were sent to almost every country in occupied Europe — and even into Auschwitz — with varying degrees of success.

The Germans, for their part, had a use for Jewish prisoners with such documents — to trade for German nationals held in Latin America or the U.S., said Medoff.

“So even when the Germans suspected these documents might not be authentic, they often did not care because they considered these prisoners to be very useful,” he said.

**Civilian Prisoner Exchange in Last Months of the War**

In January 1945, 800 Germans who had been held in the Americas were exchanged for 800 American and Latin American citizens in Germany, and among them were 149 Jews from Bergen-Belsen with Latin American documents, said Medoff.

Robert Fisch, a Minneapolis pediatrician, remembers seeing a citizenship certificate in his house in Budapest in 1944.

“My mother told me, even wrote, ‘don’t give out this paper. It is very important,”’ said Fisch, now 84.

While his work on citizenship papers stayed discreet, his role in publicizing the Auschwitz Protocol led to Swiss public protests, prayers and angry headlines. The worldwide protests they stirred may have played a part in the Hungarian government’s decision to suspend deportations of Jews to Auschwitz.

**Not Appreciated Sufficiently Because He was an Outsider**

According to Paldiel, Mantello is insufficiently appreciated because he was an outsider of the Jewish organizations, a businessman who created his own network of volunteers and emissaries. After the war he had difficulty continuing his diplomatic career, and was accused of being financially corrupt, but charges were dropped after an investigation.

One man who appreciated his efforts — and said so in writing — was Lutz, the Swiss diplomat in Budapest who delivered many of Mantello’s documents to Jews.

“You can be assured that … you rendered a valuable service which will get you the thanks –as soon as normal conditions again prevail in this world — of thousands of human beings whose lives you saved,” he wrote in a letter stored at the Washington museum.

Enrico Mantello, now 80 and living in Geneva and Rome, said he remembers his father issuing one certificate after the other.

“He was a very driving, energetic person. He needed very little sleep,” he said. “He was passionate, he did not take no for an answer.”

But after the war and until his death in 1992, Mantello was a haunted man.

Among those to whom he sent citizenship papers were his parents in what then was Hungary, but they arrived one or two days too late, and his mother and father, along with the rest of the Jews in their town, were sent to Auschwitz and murdered.

“It is a horrible, sad irony,” said Cohen, the museum researcher. “The certificates were saving people all over Europe, and despite his efforts he was unable to save his own parents.”

*Reprinted from the Matzav.com website from March 1, 2010.*

**South America**

**Devastating Chile Earthquake SparesPacific Jewish Communities**

Jewish communities bordering the Pacific Ocean emerged largely unscathed after one of the largest earthquakes on record sent buildings and bridges crashing down to their foundations throughout the South American country of Chile. As word spread of the devastation Saturday night – after the close of the holy day of Shabbat (February 27, 2010) – Jewish residents in the Chilean capital of Santiago and half a world away in Hawaii celebrated their deliverance from harm while they took part in Purim festivities. They also turned their attention to how they could help those who weren’t so lucky.

“Our hearts and prayers are with the victims of this horrible tragedy,” said Chaya Perman, co-director of Chabad-Lubavitch of Chile, who since 1981, has run a network of programs for the country’s estimated 16,000 Jewish community members, most of them centered in Santiago. “Thank G-d, the Jewish community is okay.”

The magnitude 8.8 quake struck just after 3:30 local time early Saturday morning, rousing hordes of sleeping citizens and tourists, who sought shelter in doorways and in the streets outside high-rise buildings. News reports and first-person accounts said that the shaking lasted for about 90-seconds, and that most of the damage was centered in the cities of Concepcion and Talca, just 100 kilometers from the coast.

As casualty estimates shot past 300 deaths, President Michelle Bachelet declared a “state of catastrophe.” Countries around the world, following the lead of the United States, pledged their assistance.

According to *The Jerusalem Post*, Israeli Foreign Minister spokesman Yigal Palmor said that the Israeli Embassy in Santiago did not find the names of its citizens among the names of the dead and injured.

**Light Damage to the Chabad House in Chile**

Perman reported that there was some light damage to the Chabad House, but that plans for the Purim holiday – which recalls the victory of the Persian Jews against an evil plot by a royal aide, as told in the Scroll of Esther – went ahead as scheduled. On Saturday night, the community gathered for a reading of the scroll, known in Hebrew as the megillah, and was set to host a customary feast on Sunday.

Marcelo Lewkow, national director of ORT Chile, a Jewish charity that supports schools and other communal infrastructure, told the EJewishPhilanthropy blog that 60 percent of the capital was without power, and that local officials had told people to stay indoors.

Immediately following the quake, “the communication system was very fragile,” said Lewkow. “Cell phones were off and sending [text] message was the only way people could be in contact.”

Throughout the city, “synagogues and schools are okay, pending a deeper evaluation by professionals, but there is no visible damage to the buildings or hydraulic systems,” he added. “Ort in Chile has two headquarters which both seem to be alright, and all personnel are safe and sound.”

**Launching Effort to Help Chilean Victims**

On Sunday, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which supported missions from Chabad-Lubavitch of the Dominican Republic and other relief efforts in Haiti following that country’s devastating earthquake last month, announced its intention to collect funds for Chile’s victims.

“Our hearts go out to the people of Chile,” said the organization’s CEO, Steven Schwager. “JDC will leverage our strong partnerships in the region, including the local Chilean Jewish community, to provide a quick and effective response to the needs of those affected.”

The Tsunami That Wasn’t

Meanwhile, in Hawaii, where threats of a tsunami led emergency personnel to evacuate beaches, low-lying areas, and the first three floors of hotels, fears of destruction proved largely unfounded. Footage shot by local television stations showed erratic surges in harbor tidal levels, but there was no loss of life, and very little property damage.

The accounts contrasted sharply with the havoc wreaked by a 1960 magnitude 9.5 earthquake in Chile that, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, sent a tidal wave across the Pacific, claiming 200 lives in Japan, Hawaii and the Philippines.

“It was the tsunami that wasn’t,” Pearl Krasnjansky, co-director of

**Chabad of Hawaii Waited it Out**

Because of the strictures associated with Shabbat, the Krasnjanskys didn’t have a television or radio on throughout the day.

“Someone woke us up and told us to drive away,” said Krasnjansky, who lives in Honolulu. “Our synagogue is in the hotel area, but one and a half blocks from the ocean. We went up to the second floor and waited it out.

“The tsunami was supposed to hit at 11:15 a.m.,” she continued. “Our nine-year-old said that we’d be okay, because that’s when we normally read from the Torah.”

Purim festivities in Honolulu continued as planned Saturday night, but the fate of a Sunday party in Hilo, where Rabbi Avremel and Rivka Chazanow spend Shabbat once a month, was up in the air.

“We all evacuated from the first couple of streets and walked up the hill over to the university,” said Avremel Chazanow, director of Chabad of the Big Island. “It was a beautiful day, but got very windy as the time for the tsunami approached. Students came in and saw us praying, and others came and sat down for the Shabbat meal.”

Yudi Weinbaum, a kosher caterer who lives in Honolulu with his wife and two kids, said that it was miraculous that Hawaii was spared.

“Because we’re on an island, the effects of a tsunami could knock out power and water supplies,” he said. “We can’t just drive over to the next state.”

Reprinted from Chabad News

**RABBIS' MESSAGES**

**The Benefits of**

**Being Stiff-Necked**

**By Rabbi Reuven Semah**

“*I have seen this nation and behold it is a stiff-necked people*.” (Shemot 32:9)

Moshe Rabenu prays to Hashem after the Jews worshipped the Golden Calf. Moshe says we are a stubborn people. Rashi says: “They turn the back of their necks to the one rebuking them and they refuse to listen.” From Rashi it sounds like this description was intended as an insult. But, the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah) says it was a praise. The Jews, after they accepted the Torah, give their lives entirely to sanctify the Name of Hashem. They never give in, and stubbornly cling to the Torah. Well, we can ask, what is the true intention of Moshe? If it was meant as a praise, then why mention it here at the sin of the Golden Calf? If, then, it was an insult, why does the Midrash color it as a praise?

**Stubborness Can Be Used for Good**

Rabbi Label Lam explains, like any other trait, stubbornness can be used for good or the opposite. This trait is a key to our survival. If not that we are stiff-necked we would have blended and vanished among the nations thousands of years ago. However, a rebuke was needed here because the trait was misused. It is like a doctor who would reset a broken bone to make sure it doesn’t grow hard in a warped manner. Therefore, for the sake of our survival, a stinging rebuke was needed, to re-set this trait to ensure that it grows correctly. And so we have survived until today. The net result is clear. Rashi says it was an insult, and we needed it, but now the Midrash says as a result of this, the repaired trait is our praise. It is interesting that this great sin became a source of our greatest strength.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the Jersey Shore Torah Bulletin*

**Being Wise at Heart**

**By Rabbi Shmuel Choueka**

“*I have endowed the heart of every wise-hearted person with wisdom*” (Shemot 31:6)

Hashem appointed Besalel and Aholiab to make the Mishkan and to use all those with wisdom in their hearts to assist them. If we think about it, these people had just been enslaved for many years in Egypt doing menial work. Where did anyone have experience or background to be able to create the magnificent utensils of the Mishkan?

The answer is that Hashem gave wisdom to the “wise at heart.” The one who wanted to use his heart to serve Hashem was given wisdom for G-d, Who is the Source of all knowledge. This is a lesson for us. We don’t have to know everything to serve Hashem; we have to want to know everything to serve Him. There is a lot of potential in us and in our children which is waiting to be tapped. It needs the will and the direction. Let’s not allow all that potential to go to waste with all the distractions of today’s society!

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the Jersey Shore Torah Bulletin*

[**The Human Side of the Story**](http://ohr.edu/yhiy.php?seriesid=17&archive=1)

**Wine for Mashiach**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach**

Some activists in the area of observing the laws of *Shmitah* (the seventh year in which regular agricultural activity is proscribed) were invited into the home of a farmer who was filled with thanks to Heaven for having carefully observed the demanding laws of *Shmitah* for the entire year. In celebration he offered them a drink from a bottle of very expensive wine. Unwilling to have their host incur such an expense they suggested that he save the wine for another occasion.

When the farmer insisted on serving the wine, his guests came up with an idea: "Don't open that bottle until Mashiach comes so that you can honor him with the wine you bought in honor of your *Shmitah* observance."

The farmer excitedly accepted the suggestion and placed the bottle into one of his wooden cabinets on which he placed a large sign stating that the wine inside was reserved for Mashiach.

Soon after this, a fire broke out in the farmer's home and destroyed everything inside except for that highly flammable wooden cabinet containing the wine for Mashiach.

*Reprinted from this week’s Ohr Somayach website (Ohr.Edu)*

**It Once Happened**

**The Rabbi and the**

**“Bey” of Tunisia**

In the Tunisia of old, it was customary for the "Bey," the supreme ruler of the country, to personally appoint all nominees to public positions. This included all posts within the Jewish community.

One time the Chief Rabbi of Tunisia passed away, and the vacancy needed to be filled. The Chief Rabbi held an extremely crucial position, as many important powers were invested in him. As the official head of the Jewish community, he represented all of Tunisia's Jews in the secular courts, and his word carried much weight.

At the time of the Chief Rabbi's passing, Rabbi Nehorai Germon was serving as his assistant. In most cases it was only a matter of form for the assistant to be promoted. This time, however, there were forces within the Jewish community who opposed Rabbi Nehorai's promotion.

**Fearlessly Unbending When It**

**Came to Upholding Torah Laws**

On the one hand, Rabbi Nehorai was easy to get along with, modest and unassuming. Yet when it came to upholding the Torah's laws and Jewish customs, he was absolutely rigid and fearlessly unbending. To some people, this was untenable. What they sought was a Chief Rabbi who wouldn't be a stickler for detail, someone who would know when to look away...

And so, a delegation of protesters went to the Bey. "He's much too fanatical," they told him. "Under no circumstances should Rabbi Nehorai become the next Chief Rabbi." The Bey was very receptive to their message. Soon rumors were flying that Rabbi Nehorai was no longer in the running.

**Greatness that is Connected to Humility**

It was precisely then that Rabbi Nehorai's inner strength and fortitude was revealed. As our Sages put it, "Wherever there is humility, there is also greatness." Overcoming his natural aversion to self-promotion, the Rabbi realized that he could not in good conscience simply withdraw from the fray. The dignity and reputation of the Chief Rabbinate demanded more of him.

Rabbi Nehorai went to the royal palace, where he was astounded by the throngs of people milling about. He asked the palace guards to be admitted but was informed that he would have to wait his turn. Stubbornly, Rabbi Nehorai refused to budge, demanding an immediate audience with the Bey. A commotion ensued, the angry sounds of which reached the ears of the Bey himself.

The Bey sent an aide outside to see what was going on. Quickly sizing up the situation, he returned to the Bey and explained that the assistant to the former Chief Rabbi was insisting on speaking to him. The Bey was surprised by the Jew's agressive behavior, but instructed that he be brought in.

**Why Did the Rabbi Defy All Social Conventions**

"Why was it so urgent to meet with me that you defied all social conventions?" the Bey asked Rabbi Nehorai, an artificial smile on his face.

Rabbi Nehorai was not intimidated. "If all the conventions were being adhered to," he replied seriously, "I would not have had to come here."

"What do you mean?" the Bey asked, his curiosity aroused.

"When affairs of state are attended to fairly, the assistant to the Chief Rabbi is automatically promoted to the office upon his death..."

The Bey stopped smiling. "From all the information I have received about you," he said, "it appears that you are too inflexible for the job, wedded to what you perceive as inviolate principles. It is said that you are unwilling to compromise for the sake of peace. In my opinion, a successful Chief Rabbi must know when to keep his eyes open and when to shut them..."

**Praises the Bey for His Beautiful Garden**

Rabbi Nehorai did not react, seemingly ignoring the Bey's words. "What a beautiful garden you have," he said suddenly, looking out the window at the magnificently manicured grounds. "I've never seen one more beautiful."

"It is unparalleled in all of Tunisia," the Bey responded, unable to resist the compliment.

"If I may be so bold," the Rabbi said, "it seems to me that if a lush garden like this will grow only here, of all places in the entire kingdom, surely it is a sign that G-d smiles favorably on your kingship."

The Bey almost laughed. "If everyone in the kingdom employed as many skilled horticulturists as I do, their land would also yield the same results. My gardeners are extremely vigilant, busy from dawn till dusk, planting, digging, trimming and plucking out stray weeds. But tell me, what does all this have to do with the subject we were discussing?"

**Why the Insistence on Employing**

**Skilled Horticulturalists**

"Well, I was wondering," Rabbi Nehorai replied. "Why do you insist on employing such skilled horticulturists? Why don't you hire a gardener who sometimes keep his eyes open, and other times keeps them closed..."

"Are you telling me that the Jewish community is the same as a garden?" the Bey smiled.

"In certain respects, yes," the Rabbi explained. "Our holy Torah contains 248 positive commandments, lovely seedlings in G-d's garden that must be nurtured and cared for. Then there are the Torah's 365 negative commandments. Like weeds, they must be carefully plucked out and uprooted. The Chief Rabbi is entrusted with caring for this garden, and must carry out his responsibilities faithfully."

The Bey was convinced, and a few days later Rabbi Nehorai was officially appointed Chief Rabbi of Tunisia.

*Reprinted from this week’s issue of L’Chaim, a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization.*

**Rabbi Detained at**

**U.S. Border Over Tefillin**

A super-vigilant passerby sounding an alarm among U.S. border officials led to the detaining of a rabbi and his Jewish driver as they tried to return to New York from Canada.

It was just before sunset when Rabbi Eli Silberstein, director of the Roitman Chabad-Lubavitch Center serving Cornell University in Ithaca, suggested, as he had done time and time before, that his driver, Ken Kaplan, don tefillin while it was still daytime.

The two men, who were heading to Montreal, stopped at a gas station in Watertown just before crossing the border.

**Putting on Tefillin is Good Luck**

“He likes me to put on tefillin, because I drive him all over the place,” said Kaplan, who has driven Silberstein for four years. Besides for the religious requirement, “it’s good luck.”

The pair got out, Kaplan popped the truck, and soon the rabbi was helping the driver wrap one of the box’s leather straps around his arm.

No sooner had they finished that a person approached the car.

“It was right after I put the tefillin back in the trunk that someone came up to us and said, ‘You can’t leave now, I need to talk to you,’ ” recalled Silberstein. “He was so suspicious of what we had been doing that he took our license plate number.”

**Canadian Official Waved Them Through**

They tried to explain and Kaplan drove off. At the border, Canadian officials inspected the car and, finding nothing suspicious, waved them through.

“When we got to Montreal, I got a call from my wife saying that the police in Watertown were searching for us, and that we were under suspicion for trafficking babies across the border,” said Kaplan. “The guy in the gas station saw us standing over the trunk with the straps and assumed that we were doing something criminal.”

On their return, Kaplan and Silberstein were held up for hours as more than a dozen officers combed through the vehicle.

They managed to keep their sense of humor about it.

“I was so annoyed to be detained like that, we were there until 3:00 in the morning,” said Kaplan. “But it was funny. I was laughing during the whole thing. I guess life can’t be boring.

*Reprinted from the Matzav.com website on March 4, 2010.*

February 27, 2010

**Changing Face in Poland:**

**Skinhead Puts on Skullcap**

**By Dan Bilefsky**

WARSAW — When Pawel looks into the mirror, he can still sometimes see a neo-Nazi skinhead staring back, the man he was before he covered his shaved head with a skullcap, traded his fascist ideology for the Torah and renounced violence and hatred in favor of G-d.

“I still struggle every day to discard my past ideas,” said Pawel, a 33-year-old ultra-Orthodox Jew and former truck driver, noting with little irony that he had to stop hating Jews in order to become one. “When I look at an old picture of myself as a skinhead, I feel ashamed. Every day I try and do teshuvah,” he said, using the Hebrew word for repentance. “Every minute of every day. There is a lot to make up for.”

Pawel, who also uses his Hebrew name Pinchas, asked that his last name not be used for fear that his old neo-Nazi friends could harm him or his family.

Twenty years after the fall of Communism, Pawel is perhaps the most unlikely example of the Jewish revival under way in [Poland](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/poland/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), of a moment in which Jewish leaders here say the country is finally showing solid signs of shedding the rabid anti-Semitism of the past.

Before 1939, Poland was home to more than three million Jews, more than 90 percent of whom were killed by the Nazis. Most who survived emigrated. Of the fewer than 50,000 who remained in Poland, many abandoned or hid their Judaism during decades of Communist oppression in which political pogroms against Jews persisted.

Today, though, Michael Schudrich, the chief rabbi of Poland, said he considered Poland the most pro-Israel country in the [European Union](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/e/european_union/index.html?inline=nyt-org). He said the attitude of [Pope John Paul II](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/j/_john_paul_ii/index.html?inline=nyt-per), a Pole, who called Jews “our elder brothers,” had finally entered the public consciousness.



Pawel in the Warsaw synagogue. A former truck driver and neo-Nazi skinhead, Pawel, 33, has since become an Orthodox Jew, covering his shaved head with a yarmulke and shedding his fascist ideology for the Torah. (Photo by Adam Lach for The New York Times)

**A National Myth Has Been Shattered**

Ten years after the revelation that 1,600 Jews of the town of [Jedwabne](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/08/international/europe/08POLA.html) were burned alive by their Polish neighbors in July 1941, he said the national myth that all Poles were victims of World War II had finally been shattered.

“Before 1989 there was a feeling that it was not safe to say, ‘I am a Jew,’ ” Rabbi Schudrich said. “But two decades later, there is a growing feeling that Jews are a missing limb in Poland. The level of anti-Semitism remains unacceptable, but the image of the murderous Pole seared in the consciousness of many Jews after the war doesn’t correspond to the Poland of 2010.”

The small Jewish revival has been under way for several years around eastern Europe. Hundreds of Poles, a majority of them raised as Catholics, are either converting to Judaism or discovering Jewish roots submerged for decades in the aftermath of World War II.

In the past five years, Warsaw’s Jewish community had grown to 600 families from 250. The cafes and bars of the old Jewish quarter in Krakow brim with young Jewish converts listening to Israeli hip hop music.

**Jews Coming Out of the Closet**

Michal Pirog, a popular Polish dancer and television star, who recently proclaimed his Jewish roots on national television, said the revelation had won him more fans than enemies. “Poland is changing,” he said. “I am Jewish and I feel good,” he said.

Pawel’s metamorphosis from baptized Catholic skinhead to Jew began in a bleak neighborhood of concrete tower blocks in Warsaw in the 1980s, where Pawel said he and his friends reacted to the gnawing uniformity of socialism by embracing anti-Semitism. They shaved their heads, carried knives and greeted one another with the raised right arm gesture of the Nazi salute.

“Oy vey, I hate to admit it, but we would beat up local Jewish and Arab kids and homeless people,” Pawel said on a recent day from the Nozyk Synagogue here. “We sang about stupid stuff like Satan and killing people. We believed that Poland should only be for Poles.”

**Skipping School to Visit Auscwitz**

One day, he recalled, he and his friends skipped school and took a train to Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp, near Krakow. “We made jokes that we wished the exhibition had been bigger and that the Nazis had killed even more Jews,” he said.

Even as Pawel embraced the life of a neo-Nazi, he said that he had pangs that his identity was built on a lie. His churchgoing father seemed overly fond of quoting the Old Testament. His grandfather hinted about past family secrets.

“One time when I told my grandfather that Jews were bad, he exploded and screamed at me, ‘If I ever hear you say such a thing again under my roof, you will never come back!’ ”

Pawel joined the army and married a fellow skinhead at age 18. But his sense of self changed irrevocably at the age of 22, when his wife, Paulina, suspecting that she had Jewish roots, went to a genealogical institute and discovered Pawel’s maternal grandparents on a register of Warsaw Jews, along with her own grandparents.

When Pawel confronted his parents, he said, they broke down and told him the truth: his maternal grandmother was Jewish and had survived the war by being hidden in a monastery by a group of nuns. His paternal grandfather, also a Jew, had seven brother and sisters, most of whom had perished in the Holocaust.

“I went to my parents and said, ‘What the hell’? Imagine, I was a neo-Nazi and heard this news? I couldn’t look in the mirror for weeks,” he said. “My parents were the typical offspring of Jewish survivors of the war, who decided to conceal their Jewish identity to try and protect their family.”

**Shaken by His Own Discovery**

Shaken by his own discovery, Pawel said he spent weeks of cloistered and tortured reflection but was finally overcome by a strong desire to become Jewish, even Orthodox. He acknowledged that he was drawn to extremes. He said his transformation was arduous, akin to being reborn. He even forced himself to reread “Mein Kampf” but could not get to the end because he felt physically repulsed.

“When I asked a rabbi, ‘Why do I feel this way?’ he replied, ‘The sleeping souls of your ancestors are calling out to you.’ ”

**Decides to Become an Ultra-Orthodox Jew**

At age 24, he was circumcised. Two years later, he decided to become an ultra-Orthodox Jew. He and his wife are raising their two children in a Jewish home.

Pawel noted that he was still singled out by the same anti-Semites who once counted him among their ranks. “When younger people see me on the street with my top hat and side curls they sometimes laugh at me,” he said. “But it is the old ladies who are the meanest. Sometimes, they use the language I used when I was a skinhead and say, ‘Get out and go back to your country’ or ‘Jew go home!’ ”

And now he is studying to become a shochet, a person charged with killing animals according to Jewish dietary laws. “I am good with knives,” he explained.

*Joanna Berendt contributed reporting.*

*Reprinted from the New York Times.*