

SHABBOS STORIES FOR THE 17TH YAHRZEIT OF NOACH BEN NECHEMLA

30 Tishrei/ October 29, 2019

Printed L'illuy nishmas Nechama bas R' Noach, a"h

For a free subscription, please forward your request to keren18@juno.com

Hidden in a Monastery; Saved by His Birthmark

By Adam Ross



The Shtemler brothers survived the Holocaust hiding in monasteries disguised as Christian children. The youngest of the three boys tells his incredible story. Photo taken in 1947.

Elimelech Shtemler was the youngest of three brothers who were hidden as Catholic boys in monasteries during the Nazi occupation of Belgium. Their mother emerged from hiding after the war hoping to rebuild her family, only to learn that Elimelech, aged two, had disappeared without a trace.

Determined that he be raised as a Jew she hung on to the hope that a distinguishing birthmark on his neck would help identify him. With the assistance of a Jewish soldier attached to the British army, she combed institutions, schools and orphanages across the countryside before they were reunited. Now aged 78, living in Israel, Elimelech is the proud grandfather of 27 Jewish grandchildren.

Meeting the Shtemlers

The Shtemler family lived in the heart of the thriving Orthodox community of Antwerp, Belgium. Yosef Tzvi, a tradesman, also served as a cantor (chazan) in one of the city's many synagogues. Frida, his wife, was a dedicated housewife raising their three sons. Elimelech was born in October 1941, 18 months after Hitler invaded Belgium. Motke, his oldest brother, was seven at the time, and Eliezer was five.



Elimelech, with the birthmark on his neck

“I remember very little from my childhood,” Elimelech Shtemler told Aish.com from his home in Jerusalem. “I was just too young. What I know was told to me by my mother and older brothers.” Motke passed away three years ago and Eliezer died last year. “Now it is down to me to tell our family’s story.”

Within a year of the occupation, Belgium's Jews were forced to wear a yellow star and in November 1942, when Elimelech was just one year old, along with many other Jews, he and his family were arrested and sent to the detention and deportation camp of Mechelen, a converted army barracks in the south west of the country.

As the arrests gained pace, the Jewish community sought the help of Elisabeth of Belgium, the benevolent queen mother of King Leopold III of Belgium, who as the daughter of a Bavarian Duke had some influence in Germany.



Mechelen detention camp

Saved by a Righteous Queen

After hearing of the daily arrests, imprisonment and deportation of Jews, Elisabeth wrote to Hitler, requesting that Jews with Belgium citizenship not be

persecuted. A telegram reply from Berlin stated that the Jews with Belgian citizenship would not be deported, and that those who were under arrest in the camps awaiting deportation could receive visitors.

Most of Belgium's approximately 75,000 Jews had fled to the country from neighboring Germany or from Poland in the East, and being without citizenship, did not benefit from the queen mother's intervention, however the Shtemler's did, and after being held for nine months at Mechelen, they were released shortly after.

A year later the Nazis reneged on this decision, ordering all Belgian Jews to be deported. The Shtemlers had at least been granted some precious time to arrange places to hide.

In all, 25,000 Jews were deported from Mechelen, with around 24,000 murdered, mainly at Auschwitz.

"I owe my life to the efforts of this queen," Elimelech says adamantly. "It is so important to recognize the efforts of those who were righteous."

Into Hiding

Elimelech was not yet two years old in 1943 when his father received his second fateful order to report to the Gestapo. He chose to hand in himself in rather than put his family at risk. In a memoir for his family, Motke wrote, "It was a Friday morning, he went alone, and we waited hopefully for his return. The table was set for Shabbat, and as nightfall came, we sat waiting for him, we waited and waited, and yet he never returned. We never saw him again."

The following day, frightened and sensing their arrests were also imminent, Frida Shtemler acted instinctively, taking the boys to a nearby forest overnight. When they returned the following day, they found out the Gestapo had indeed paid a visit to their home.

Activating a plan to go into hiding, she headed immediately to a friend in the Belgian underground who directed her to Joseph Andre, a young Catholic priest who took the Motke and Eliezer to a monastery, while Elimelech was separated from his brothers and taken to an institution for younger boys. Frida was hidden in the region of Namur in the South of the country, on a farm close to where her two oldest sons were.

Hanging on to the Shema

Motke wrote, "Our father had gone, and now our mother was handing us over to a priest. I couldn't understand why, it is one of my most difficult memories. On one of our first days, the priest took me before the altar and told me to bend on one knee, but I told him I was Jewish and I wouldn't do it. He took me to a side room and explained that I could never say that again, because my life was in danger."

Years accompanying their father to synagogue gave them a way to hold on to their identity. “My brother and I remembered the *shema* from synagogue, it was the only prayer we knew by heart from start to finish, and we decided every time we were taken to pray this is what we would say.”

Frida did her best to keep track of how her sons were doing, and remarkably, on a number of occasions Motke and Eliezer even absconded from the Monastery to visit her. But during the two years in hiding Frida lost all connection with Elimelech.

Rebuilding a family

When the war finished, Frida, like so many survivors, set about piecing her family back together. Her hopes of seeing her husband again ended when Belgian officials confirmed his death at the Dachau concentration camp. Tragically he had survived years of slave labor, only to die of Typhus two days after being liberated.

Devastated by the news, she collected Motke then 11, and Eliezer 9, before beginning a desperate search for her youngest son.



*In the hands of Jewish Brigade soldier,
Tuvia Ettinger, the day he was found*

“I must have been moved to another institution because when the war ended. My mother had no idea where I was. No one knew where I had been taken.”

Locating children became a major issue following the liberation of the camps, especially when it became clear that many would have no close relatives alive to reclaim them.



Elimelech celebrating his bar mitzvah in Israel

In Belgium, thanks to an active underground and the efforts of the church, over 40% of the country’s Jews – one of the highest percentages across Europe – survived by living in hiding.

Although, as Motke wrote, “The monasteries were not always keen to return Jewish children. Some felt they were redeeming them by bringing them up as Christians.”

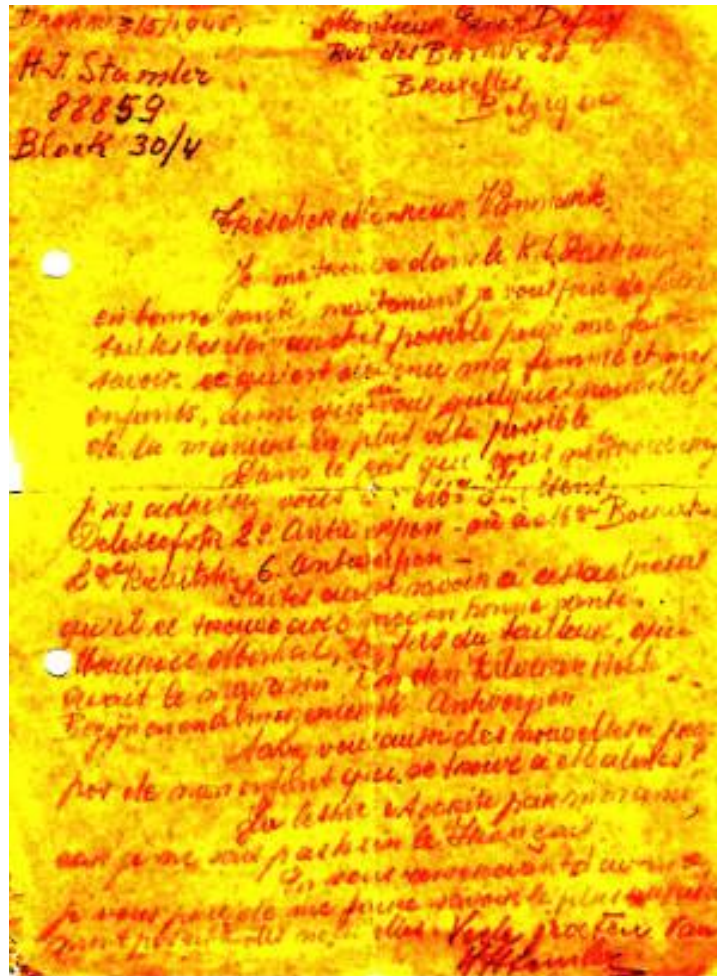
Along with those searching was Tuvia Ettinger from Petah Tikva, who had volunteered for the Jewish Brigade, fighting alongside the British to defeat the Nazis. On meeting him, Frida asked him for his help in finding her son.

Elimelech’s Birthmark

Despite knowing that Elimelech would probably not recognize her, she had one hope: a distinctive birthmark on his neck could be the ticket to finding him.

Frida asked Ettinger for his help going from institution to institution, asking for with every young boy to unbutton his collar. Eventually, Elimelech was found in a monastery in the town of Mechelen close to where the family had originally been imprisoned.

“I don’t know how long they were looking, or how many places they had to go to, but without a sign like the one I had on my neck, it would have been very difficult for my mother prove to the monastery that I was the son she had been looking for.”



The letter from Elimelech's father

A photograph, taken on the day he was found shows Elimelech in Ettinger’s arms. From the expression on the young soldier’s face, one would think that Ettinger had been reunited with his own child, such was the relief and joy of locating a Jewish child after the Holocaust.

A New Life in Israel

With family in Israel, Frida sent Motke there to learn in a yeshiva to rebuild his Jewish education, while the two younger brothers lived in a Jewish institution in Antwerp until 1949 when they too left for Israel. This journey stands as Elimelech's earliest memory.

"I can still remember seeing the Carmel Mountains as we approached Haifa on the boat. It was the start of a new life."

The family settled in Petach Tikva where they stayed in close connection with Tuvia Ettinger and his family. "We lived near to them and I became good friends with Tuvia's younger brother." When he reached the age of 12, Ettinger's father prepared Elimelech for his bar mitzvah.

My father's final request

Ten years ago Elimelech discovered a letter his father, Yosef Tzvi, had written days before his death.



Elimelech and Rina Shtemler, celebrating 50 years of marriage

"The U.S army soldiers who liberated the camp offered the survivors an opportunity to write a letter home. My father wrote to a family friend."

Stating that he was okay, even though he knew he must have known he was seriously ill, he included one question: 'Have you heard any news about my son in Mechelen?' Presumably he knew where his youngest son would be taken.

“I was in shock. After all these years I found out that I was on my father’s mind. He knew I was there and he had asked about me. That is the only thing I have from him.”

Elimelech and his wife Rina have been married for over 50 years. They have 27 grandchildren and four great grandchildren. “Baruch Hashem we live in Israel,” he says defiantly, taking the rough times with the good. Tragically, his oldest grandchild Shlomit Krigman was murdered in a terrorist attack in 2016.

Today he carries the responsibility of telling his family’s story, speaking to groups of students and communities throughout the country. When he does, he always concludes the same way: by opening his shirt collar and showing the birthmark that reunited him with his family.

“As the years go on,” he says, “I think it’s more and more important to explain about the Holocaust, to thank the righteous people who acted, and to marvel at how we have remained Jewish throughout.”

Reprinted from the October 22, 2019 posting on Aish.com website.