

SCHNEERSON, SCHNEUR ZALMAN 1898-1980

By Chana Arnon-Benninga, Jerusalem
September. 2010



In the ongoing efforts to gain recognition for the phenomenon of Jews who rescued Jews, The *Jerusalem Committee for Recognition of Jews who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust (JRJ)* has been documenting cases of Jews who made great efforts, always at the risk of their lives, to assist their brethren to survive the Nazi onslaught. The means used were many, from supplying forged documents, finding hiding places and aiding in the transfer to neutral countries to assisting righteous gentiles belonging to church organizations or in the resistance. Forged documents supplied false identity papers, food coupons, and sometimes travel documents. Hiding places were found sometimes "en bloc" and more often with individual families, while the transfer to neutral countries, Switzerland and Spain, was an adventurous and very dangerous undertaking recently meticulously documented by Nancy Lefenfeld, a freelance historian in the US. I can only express my amazement and great satisfaction to have found another outstanding example of Jewish rescue in the rabbi who is the subject of this short article. This came about when, during the 2009 conference of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors, I met Bertha Schwarz-Teitelbaum, who was one of the children under the rabbi's patronage.

This is the story of an orthodox Jewish rescuer in the south of France who managed to save more than one hundred children during the worst time of persecution – after the German occupation of Vichy France. This rabbi from the Chabad movement was not about to give up his religious principles, his adherence to the letter of the Halakha, his missionary drive of turning his charges into religiously observant and halakha-literate Jews, or his in-your-face Jewishness. He didn't give up his Hassidic garb, his hat, his beard (red), his side locks, and was not shy of speaking French with a strong Russian accent to those in authority. But he did, in order to finance the rescue of the children from Hell, go into debt the collateral of which was his Paris apartment and other possessions, after the war. Employing these unorthodox means, barely acceptable by related organizations, the rabbi and his family themselves survived the war, immigrating to New York where his children and grandchildren now live.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman Schneerson (Chneerson in French) was born in Gomel (Homel), Belarus, the second largest city in the country, on September 2, 1898. "Like many other cities in eastern Europe, Gomel before the Second World War had a significant Jewish population... Some Jewish residents fled in the early months of the war (WWII), but those who remained were confined to ghettos and most were eventually executed by the Nazis."

(Wikipedia) Rabbi Schneerson, however, after obtaining ordination from the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Russia, immigrated to Palestine in 1935, where he stayed for only a few months before leaving for France with the intention to immigrate to the U.S.A. A change of plans on the way resulted in his establishing residence in Paris, at 10 Rue Dieu (sic!) with consequences he could not have foreseen. Zalman Schneerson was a cousin of both the 6th and the 7th Lubavitcher rebbes; his daughter, Hadassa Carlebach, lives in Brooklyn and some of the above information I received from her.

In Paris, Schneerson founded *the Association des Israelites Pratiques* (AIP) (the Union of Orthodox Jews) which "provide(d) material relief to needy Jewish refugees...founded Hebrew schools and synagogues in Paris, set up kosher soup kitchens and distributed clothing and money." (Quote from the abstract of a panel proposal submitted by Harriet Jackson to Rutgers University, April, 2008). Then, moving to the south of France in the summer of 1940, to the village of Brout Vernet, district of Allier, in Auvergne, Schneerson took up the challenge of sheltering children left bereft of parents through death or inability to cope. This was the beginning of a struggle of life-and-death with the forces of evil, which was to continue until the last days of the war in France.

A comparative study of saving children's lives in three neighboring countries, Belgium, Italy, and France, gives the French Jewish resistance the lead. German "achievement" in the annihilation of the Jews in France is "low" (25%) relative to other countries, being in great measure due to the Jewish organizations and individuals, like Rabbi Schneerson, who were aware from the very beginning of the true intentions of the Germans, putting their lives on the line to rescue others. The percentage of children who perished in France was lower than the death toll nationally, or approximately 12.5%. (Renee Dray-Bensousan, *Cahiers d'ARES*, no.4, 2004, p.17) In France, the great influx of Jews from Eastern Europe starting from the beginning of the 20th century – Jews who knew anti-Semitism at its worst - is a contributing factor in the efficiency of their rescue efforts.

Sometime during the year 1941, the rabbi and his family moved from the estate of Morelles in Brout Vernet, and settled in Marseilles. Here he established the new center of his AIP organization and scraped together the money for the arrival of new child refugees. Delphine Deroo, in her book, *Les enfants de la Martelliere*, has the following lively description:

Incredible rumors went around the city. It was said that a strange rabbi, recently arrived from the interior of Russia, was shaking heaven and earth to rescue fugitives. A tall, emaciated figure, engulfed by his black caftan, hobbling on his club-foot, he muttered his sentences with a marked foreign accent from behind a long red beard. Yet nothing seemed to be able to stop him. Day and night he hobbled from one end of the city to the other, heaping requests on the authorities, playing off the weaknesses of the local administration. (p.63. Translation CA)

The move was necessitated by new restricting regulations promulgated by the Vichy government, but also because of the growing numbers of refugees in the southern city who needed his – self-imposed - attention. Hadassa, the rabbi's 13-year old daughter, was charged with bringing down nearly a dozen children from Brout Vernet to Marseilles, a task of which she acquitted herself with honor, not without huge emotional expense on her part. These were times of exceptional demands and proportionate responses; not a time for the fainthearted. A new period had begun.

In April 1942, Schneerson rented a big property outside of Marseilles, close to the hills in the east, in a wooded area, to serve as the new home and school for the fugitive children. It was the Villa Beaupin, in the Vieille Chapelle district of Marseilles, in the words of Bertha Schwarz, "located in the countryside, just a bicycle ride away from the busy port city of Marseilles. I remember arriving at the Villa Beaupin and meeting Rabbi Schneerson and his wife, Sara.

Immediately, we got a shower, clothes and food." She goes on to say, "We lived with many other children, whose parents like ours, had been interned or deported. They spoke a variety of languages. What we shared was the pain of being torn away from our own parents. Many of us cried. But to occupy our minds, Rabbi Schneerson encouraged us to study and help with chores as much as we could." Thousands of letters from internment camp prisoners were received with pleas for food and ritual objects. Bertha remembers helping fill food parcels destined for those prisoners in internment camps all over the south of France.

The home Rabbi Schneerson had created was not of the common variety: it was a home for children whose religious education was of the utmost importance. No concessions to the constraints of reality were considered, to the great aggravation of other Jewish organizations. Here is an example of the rabbi's stand on principles, in a letter written on July 7, 1943, to the mayor of Voiron (in the Italian occupied part of France where the home had moved to):

The children in our home...do not consume meat in deference to their religious principles. (...) In fact, as the children came to us because their parents and they themselves adhere to living according to ritual principles, it is easy to imagine how much they suffer as a result of a lack of proper food supplies. (Deroo, 80. Translation CA)

This letter was written to obtain permission to use the local abattoir of Voiron for occasional kosher slaughtering. Permission was granted, but it was of short duration due to the arrival of German troops in the region at the end of the summer. Yet it is a good example of the stubbornness of the rabbi on these issues, in spite of entreaties by both secular and rabbinical elements for leniency. Yet matters other than strictly following religious rituals were as important to the rabbi: the matter of joy and elation at the occasion of holidays such as Purim or Simchat Torah were just as valuable, as attests a letter written in the fall of 1943 encouraging students to celebrate Sukkoth and Simchat Torah with joy:

"אל תלמידים היקרים יחיו!

שלום וברכה.

דבר אחד הנני מבקשכם בזה – להרבות בשמחה במשך החג, וביותר כעת בהקפות דליל שמיני עצרת ושמחת תורה. וגדול ענין השמחה. ובזמנים הללו בייחוד, לרומם הנפש משפלותה ולקבל בקבלה פנימית ההסכם לשנות את המידות לטובה ולעבוד את ה' בקיום המצוות ולימוד התורה. וממתקת דינים למעלה, וגורמה שפעת ברכה ברוחניות וגשמיות במשך השנה. ואם תרצו להיטיב לי ולאחרים ולכל ישראל הצריכים לעזר ה' תרבו בשמחה, אשר כל תנועת שמחת הנפש בה' תטיב את המצב. וה' יעזרנו להתראות בשמחה. וכמו שנאמר כי בשמחה תצאו.

שניאורזון זלמן"

Dear students, bless you!

Shalom and beracha,

I have one request to make of you – to be as happy as you can during the holidays and especially now, for the hakafot (the dancing around with the Torah Scrolls) of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. The matter of joy is very important, especially during these trying times, to lift up the soul from its downcast condition and to resolve improving moral standards and to serve G-d by fulfilling his commandments and studying the Torah. And by making the above religious commandments sweeter, you will create an abundance of blessing both spiritually and physically during the entire year. And if you want to please me and others and the entire people of Israel who need G-d's help, be happy as much as you can as every sign of happiness of the soul in G-d will improve the current situation.

May G-d help us to meet again in happiness, as it is said: For in joy will you go forth!

Zalman Schneerson

(Letter in the YIVO archives. Translation CA)

These letters show us the complex nature of the rabbi's personality and his major concerns as he feels the pressure of responsibility for the children weighing down upon him: Not only their physical survival, but just as much their spiritual wellbeing, their *raison d'etre* for the rest of their lives is of utmost importance. However, in the course of the next two years, the existential threats are of such urgency that most of his energy will be devoted to moving his charges from one region to another to whisk them out of the worst danger areas. The weight of responsibility on his shoulders and the financial hardships ever present, the dwindling support from outside organizations and the growing number of children, made it imperative upon him to use his own finances.

The arrest of six children in Marseilles on August 12, 1942, at three o'clock in the morning, sent shock waves throughout the system of Jewish rescue, the AIP, the OSE, the UGIF (who supported the rabbi's homes). The children were eventually released after frantic attempts on the part of Leon Poliakov, who was the rabbi's (secular) right hand and served as his secretary (he later became an academic and published important works on the history of anti-Semitism and totalitarianism). This shocking event, not unexpected yet serving as a wake-up call, set in motion a number of moves the first of which was in the direction of Seignebon, an estate near a small town, Demu, in the department of Gers, in the south-west corner of France near the Pyrenees. To this faraway place, which had been rented in July as a "just-in-case" last resort, the children and some adults were spirited on November 16, 1942. During their stay here some were able to use the services of the Jewish underground to cross the border to Switzerland. Bertha Schwarz, her mother and her sisters were of this group. Today, Bertha lives in the US and is a member of the World Federation of Child Survivors.

Some one hundred people, most of them children, encountered an estate in an advanced state of disrepair. Having come by train from Marseilles to Auch, and made the rest of the way by truck, they found a place rundown by more than a decade of neglect. However, it was spacious and the renewal, with the limited means at their disposal, was a labor of love.

This period of relative calm came to an end in March, 1943. Vichy France was now occupied by the Axis forces and the rounding up of Jews was intensifying. On February 24, there had been a botched search by the French police and some time later a failed attempt at round-up by the Germans. Schneerson knew he couldn't stretch his luck any longer; he had to make a quick decision. In addition to danger from the outside, the financial situation was going from bad to worse: the UGIF had lowered its financial support drastically and the municipal authorities had given Schneerson orders to dismiss his foreign-born paid staff. Schneerson was in shock. His children were suffering from hunger, he would be without staff soon, and he

had to rescue the entire home. Making use of connections with the Jewish resistance in Grenoble, Schneerson was able to evacuate the entire home surreptitiously. The children were divided into small groups, and taken by taxi, to buses and trains in the nearest big city, Toulouse; from there they first reached Grenoble in the Italian-occupied zone of l'Isere, and then went on to Voiron, further north in l'Isere. Here the rabbi, aided by family connections, found a new home, right outside Voiron, near Saint-Etienne-de-Crossey. At the Chateau du Manoir in L'Etang-Dauphin, an old hamlet, he settled his charges. The castle, a large three-story house surrounded by a large garden, built in 1781, instantly captured the children's imagination. They loved it, from the sweeping entrance road lined with tall majestic beech trees to the white building topped by a black-tiled roof; it all seemed to come straight out of a fairy tale.

It was spring and the Pesach preparations were to take place right away. All the children were engaged in helping to get the job done in time. Ritual laws were, as usual, strictly observed. Preparations for the following Pesach had already begun on arrival in Seignebon in November, 1942. The rabbi, always focused on the religious-ritual side of life in his homes, had begun the baking of the *matzos*, for the week-long Passover holiday, where it begins: the sowing of wheat for the flour. When the wheat ripened and was reaped (by the boys), the girls were put in charge of grinding it into flour. They were issued tiny hand mills with which they laboriously ground the wheat. From pieces of cloth found here and there, bags of 5-kilo size each were sewn to hold the new, clean flour for *matzos* to supply the need in the whole southern region. During their flight to Voiron, in March 1943, each of the girls was given one bag of flour to carry in her backpack. The "illegal" goods thus transported could well have ended in arrest, with disastrous consequences, and the girls were naturally thankful and surprised when all the flour reached its destination without anyone having been arrested. The only one not surprised was the rabbi, who, as a believing Jew, had been sure of its happy ending from the start. (From Mirjam Falk, *Sefinath Hayyai*)

The next step was to find a clean baking oven in the area. The right place materialized in the form of an outdoor oven at a nearby village belonging to Paul Jacolin, a friendly farmer. The rabbi oversaw the baking according to the strictest halakhic rules befitting the ultra-orthodox. M. Jacolin looked on in amazement and during the process a real bond was created between the two men, which would prove valuable in the months to come. But, the times were menacing, food was scarce and the children went hungry for most of the day. The strict ritual observance adhered to by the rabbi enraged some of them. His refusal to show any lenience in this respect restricted the supply of food even more than necessary. During this Pesach the bare menu existed of matzos, some nuts, some fruit and vegetables. During this time there was a large turnover of children in the home, some were taken back by their parents, some spirited across the border to Switzerland. The Italian authorities refused to cooperate with the Germans in deporting Jews and provided shelter in hotels in the area, and some children were taken there. The Jewish Scouts and the Zionist Youth Movement organized illegal border crossings into Switzerland of which another part of the children profited.

Violent discussions pro and con flight took place between the rabbi and his charges, with the rabbi justifying passiveness and belief in the benevolence of God; the atmosphere at the home turned bitter and antagonistic. Nerves were getting frazzled.

Several factors played in the decision to leave the Chateau du Manoir and move to Nice in the south. It seemed a rational choice, given the objective dangers in the Isere region, but rationality at this time was a broken reed which offered no security, an unreliable friend. The move came on September 6, 1943, when a hundred children were taken by two taxis and a truck to the big city in the south, leaving a small group of young children behind in the Chateau with a few adults. Nice beckoned many Jews: the Italians had changed sides and made a pact with the Allied forces in the first days of September. Twenty-five thousand Jewish refugees fled to the city assuming they would be safe there, but the Germans invaded and set a trap for the Jews. On September 10, a manhunt of unprecedented proportion was initiated at the instigation of Alois Brunner in which some 6,000 people were rounded up and deported to Drancy in the north and from there to extermination. The move from the Chateau du Manoir had proven to be a mistake and all efforts were made to reverse it. Leon Poliakov,

as a member of the resistance, was able to smuggle children back to Voiron in two or three trips in a truck, where they hid under empty cardboard boxes; the young resistant worker, May Charretier, had taken a group of kids back on the train, but there had been a price: two of the members of the Schneerson home were caught in the train station, sent to Drancy and from there to the east. Before the Jewish New Year, at the end of September, the group had managed to return to the Chateau. The rabbi and his family stayed in hiding in Nice until after the Jewish holidays, in mid-October. Those arrested were the administrative director of the home, Mr. Philippe Feist, and one of the boys, David Belk.

The winter of 1943/44 was a sad one for the home. The rabbi and his family were in hiding, there was the tragedy of Philippe Feist and David Belk arrested in Nice, and the trauma of witnessing the manhunt conducted on the streets of that city. This all added to the fear and depression now bearing down on the children and the adults. And then there was the chronic lack of food, but the worst was yet to come.

During the winter months, the children who were still in the home were dispersed and hidden in five locations in the general area, one of which was La Martelliere, where three young men were in charge of a group of adolescent boys and small children. The infamous round-up of La Martelliere took place here in the night of 22/23 March 1944. Sixteen boys and one woman, the mother of two brothers in the group, were arrested and deported. Only one of the boys survived the war. This was the worst of the calamities visited upon the Schneerson children. The same afternoon of 22 March, Mme. Sara Schneerson, the rabbi's wife, was arrested in La Manche, close to Voiron, where the rabbi and some of his students had found a hiding place. She was taken to the French Millice headquarters, interrogated and tortured, but she withstood the ordeal courageously without giving away one slight bit of information, neither the whereabouts of the rabbi nor her daughter's, Hadassa. Forced to swallow bits of a phonograph record and pieces of soap, she nevertheless stood by her assertion that the rabbi had been able to escape to Switzerland. After her release, she walked around for miles instead of going straight to her husband's hideaway in order to mislead her torturers. (Deroo, p. 237/8 with slight corrections made by Mrs. Hadassa Carlebach) Her ploy worked and the hiding place was not discovered.

From then on, until the liberation of Grenoble, on August 22, 1944, the children, the rabbi, his wife and the young adults, were hidden at different places in the Voiron area, some not seeing the light of day for weeks on end. At liberation, the Schneerson family returned to Paris, taking some of the survivors with them; others went back to La Manoir to take care of some of the orphans helped by students who wanted to stay on. In 1945, Erwin Uhr, the only survivor of the round-up at La Martelliere, returned, traumatized. In September 1946, the youth home closed its doors definitely, the last members relocating to Boissy-Saint-Leger, in the Paris area. (Deroo, p. 239)

The number of children saved by Rabbi Schneerson, his wife and their helpers, cannot be definitely recorded. Many children went in and out, escaping to neutral countries, being turned back at the borders of Switzerland and returning, etc. However, the number is estimated by some to be well over one hundred.

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