

was afraid. So the other two went and were able to buy the tickets. But when they came back, the other girl was gone. The Germans had come and taken her away. The two sisters went to the train and were able to get on, but once inside, a group of teenage boys began to taunt them. The boys said they looked Jewish. They said their noses gave them away and asked to see their papers.

One of the sisters began to cry. A tall boy stood up and came over to them. He said he didn't like to see girls cry and told her to tell the truth and he wouldn't hurt them. They admitted they were Jewish. The boy asked where they were going and they told him they didn't know. The girls got out at the next stop and the boy did, too, and began to follow them. The girls started to cry again, even though he promised that he wouldn't hurt them.

The tall boy took them home and hid the two girls for the rest of the war. After the war finally ended and the Germans had been routed, there were no Jews left anywhere around them. The older girl was only fifteen. And it was then—after the war had ended—that the boy declared his love for her. There was no one left in her family. Her parents, along with all of her extended family, had been killed. For saving her life, she married him. The woman telling Rabbi Besser the story was their daughter. The family lived like gentiles. One day, years later, this woman was in school and a boy brought in a cracker she had never seen before. It was matzo.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Go ask your mother," the boy replied. Everyone else in the town seemed to know her secret but her.

It was never easy to hide one's Jewishness in Poland. But for this particular girl, the pervasive anti-Semitism had the opposite effect. Instead of running from it and hiding, she wanted to know more about Judaism. In an unusual

move in those days, the mid-1960s, her mother sent her to Israel for a two-week visit. She returned to Poland, but the trip had changed her. She became more active in Jewish affairs and eventually helped start a Jewish school.

The story was not an unusual one, although the outcome was unique. Some of the adoptive parents kept their children's background a secret to protect them from a situation that would obviously complicate their lives. Some, perhaps, didn't want to compete with the real mother and father. And some were afraid that the children would denounce their Catholicism and revert to Judaism, thus denying them entry to heaven.

One particularly poignant story illustrates the long, difficult relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jews. A middle-aged lawyer in New York came to Rabbi Besser seeking help finding a brother he'd never met. During the war, a Jewish woman was hiding in various homes with her husband and six-year-old son. In one of the homes, the owner got drunk one day when the woman was alone with her son and attacked her.

The woman ran out into the street with the boy and both were struck by an oncoming streetcar. The mother was not seriously hurt, but the boy was not so lucky. He was carried to a nearby hospital and there the doctors had to amputate his foot. They also made a discovery. After the boy's pants were removed, they realized he was Jewish. The people at the hospital refused to hide the boy—hiding Jews carried a death sentence. But a local convent took him in. For a while, the mother was able to bring small items to the convent for her son, but soon the war took a more serious turn and she was unable to visit.

When the war ended, the woman had survived. She went back to the convent but no one seemed to know where

Yiddish lullabies. The rabbi sang one, then two, then three. By the second song, the older people first began mouthing the words, then some tentatively joined in. Finally, almost everyone was singing with tears streaming down their faces. The rabbi's singing had sparked distant memories of their mothers singing to them so many decades ago.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST

Everywhere they traveled, there were always people who came up to Rabbi Besser and asked to "have a word" with him. Once, when he was walking out of a cemetery, he was stopped by a woman who asked if she could just walk around him in order to see him from all sides.

"I wondered if this was some kind of hocus-pocus," he recalls.

The woman then explained that he reminded her of a grandfather she hadn't seen in over fifty years. In fact, she hadn't seen anyone who looked like him since the war.

Most often the people who came up to him had discovered they were Jewish late in life. Sometimes a mother on her deathbed confessed to her child that she was not the true mother and that, many years ago, a Jewish woman handed her a child on a gray day during the war in her last hope of saving it. Sometimes, people would sift through letters and documents after the death of a parent and find a name they had never seen before—only to discover that this person was their real parent. These children were raised as Catholics in a very Catholic country. Often, the news didn't come as a complete surprise. In inexplicable ways, they seemed to know they were different. In all cases, their motives for talking with Rabbi Besser were personal

and complex. The rabbi became a spiritual adviser, a confidant, and even a marriage counselor. Most often the people who discovered they were Jewish were married to non-Jews, and this raised a new series of problems. The non-Jewish partner hadn't signed on for this eventuality—sickness and health, yes, but a Jewish spouse was another matter.

Once, after one of his lectures, a senior official in the government came up to him and asked him for seven tapes of the talk.

"Seven?" the rabbi replied. "Why so many?"

The man explained that he knew seven women—four were married to generals and three to cabinet officers—who were Jewish and would probably like to hear them.

"It was like the floodgates opened up," the rabbi remembers of those days. The stories were always different, but in many ways always the same.

One night in a hotel, a woman came to Rabbi Besser and wanted a word with him. The woman's mother had lived in Zloczow (near Lodz). By 1942, the Germans were going from city to city, town to town, rounding up and killing all the Jews. The Jews of Zloczow learned what was coming and tried to send all the children into hiding. There weren't many options and so the children were sent into the woods.

Ten days later the children came back to the town but everyone was gone—their parents, everyone, just gone. Three girls were walking together. Two of them were sisters and the eldest was twelve years old. They heard that the Germans were coming back so they thought it would be better to go to the next village where there were no Jews.

Two of the girls looked Jewish, but the third had blond hair and could pass as a gentile. They asked the fair-haired girl to buy three train tickets for another town, but the girl

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