

The half-Jewish Nazi who saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe

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By Raphael Ahren

Thanks to the late Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, Chabad Lubavitch is a well-known and powerful Hasidic movement, with 4,000 emissaries now stationed around the world. But few people know that the rebbe's predecessor, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, owes his life to a half-Jewish Nazi officer acting under the direct order of the head of the Third Reich's military intelligence agency.

The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe was hiding in war-torn Warsaw during the days after the German invasion in 1939. After locating the rabbi at the order of Adm. Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the so-called Abwehr, Maj. Ernst Bloch, whose father was Jewish but who had no particular love for Judaism or those who practiced the religion fervently, enabled him to escape to safety in Latvia.

"This operation came about as a result of back-channel diplomatic efforts by the Germans to try and convince the Americans not to enter the war with the British and French against Germany," said Larry Price, whose documentary about this episode, "The Chabad Rebbe and the German Officer," airs tonight (Channel 1, 9:45 P.M.). According to the Jerusalem-based journalist and filmmaker, the American Chabad community at the time was small in number, but influential enough to save their leader.

"Using their contacts, Chabad managed to get Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis involved," the 66-year-old told Haaretz. "Brandeis contacted one of [U.S. President Franklin Delano] Roosevelt's right-hand men, Benjamin Cohen, who influenced Roosevelt to toss the Jewish people a bone. That bone was Rabbi Schneerson."

On Roosevelt's orders

At the time, those demanding that the U.S. government take on a stronger role regarding the fate of European Jewry did so despite "tremendous anti-Semitism in America," Price said. "Roosevelt had to tread lightly and do something, so he thought that perhaps rescuing the rebbe would ameliorate the situation with the Jewish community. The Germans, for their part, thought perhaps they could keep a backdoor channel open with the Americans and prevent them from entering the war."

Releasing one rabbi was a relatively low price to pay, he added. Price's 56-minute documentary details the background of the Schneerson deal and how Bloch and his fellow Abwehr agents accompanied the rabbi and about 20 of his relatives and peers in the first-class cabin of a train from Warsaw to Berlin, using his acting skills to avoid being arrested by suspicious Nazi officers. In the German capital, Schneerson was given over to Latvian diplomats, who brought him to safety in Riga. About a year later he made his way to New York, where he died in 1950. He was succeeded the following year by his son-in-law, Menachem M. Schneerson.

Price, who was born in Chicago and immigrated to Israel in 1971, came across Schneerson's story while working on his previous documentary film, "Hitler's Jewish Soldiers," which tells the story of some of the estimated 150,000 men of Jewish origin who served in the German army during World War II.

"I thought it was a conundrum: Why would the Germans want to send anybody to rescue an ultra-Orthodox Jew from the Germans? It's a very unique story," Price said.

This story is by:



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