

RESCUED FROM THE REICH | By Betsey Farnham

Bryan Mark Rigg '91, author of *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers*, has done it again. His second book, *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Yale University Press, 2004), presents the riveting story of the little-known and unlikely rescue of the leader of a group of Hasidic Jews from German-occupied Warsaw in December 1939. As if that were not surprising enough, the leader of the rescue operation, Ernst Bloch, was both a decorated soldier in the German Army and half-Jewish.

Rigg's book reads like a detective story; his considerable research and numerous interviews allow him to take his reader almost day by day from the early concern of American Lubavitchers about their leader's safety to the Rebbe's arrival in America in March 1940. Along the way, he writes of the efforts of highly placed members of the Roosevelt administration as well as those of equally influential members of Hitler's government, without whose assistance the rescue could not have taken place.

The branch of Hasidic Jews called Lubavitchers came from the town of Lubavitch in Byelorussia. Hasidim (Hebrew for "pious ones") are the followers of the Baal Shem Tov, an 18th-century teacher who held that Judaism should involve the hearts and souls as well as the minds of its believers. By the 20th century, the Lubavitch movement had tens of thousands of followers in Europe and the United States. Their Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, had a very close relationship with his followers and acted as an intermediary between his people and God.

Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and the Rebbe and his followers were soon trapped in Warsaw. Nazi bom-

bardment of Warsaw was extensive, and Schneersohn, who hoped to move on to Latvia, was unable to leave the city. He and his followers celebrated the High Holy Days while German bombs exploded all around them. On September 28, Warsaw capitulated to the Nazis. Although the Rebbe could not leave, his

followers hoped the Germans would believe he had been killed in the bombing and would not try to find him.

Meanwhile, the Rebbe's American followers were pressuring the U.S. government to help rescue him. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, whose wife's father was Jewish, was asked to help locate the Rebbe. Justice Louis Brandeis spoke to Attorney General Benjamin Cohen, asking him whether he could determine whether the Rebbe was safe. Cohen, in turn, contacted

Robert Pell, assistant chief of the State Department's European Affairs Division, who was in touch with influential German officials; he in turn contacted Helmut Wohlthat, chief administrator of Goering's Four Year Plan and a Nazi Party member, and asked for help. Pell also wrote the American consul general in Berlin, who contacted Wohlthat directly and promised "the absolute discretion of the American State Department," aware, as he was, of the risk involved in such activity. Rigg explains, "U.S. relations with Germany had remained strained as a result of Hitler's persecution of Jews and his invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland. Wohlthat therefore welcomed an opportunity to restore a modicum of goodwill between the two nations." He met with

Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the Abwehr, and told him of the case. Canaris, who disapproved of much that Hitler was doing and later participated in several coup attempts, ordered Major Ernst Bloch to carry out the rescue.

The rescue involved considerable difficulties. If Bloch had the good luck to find out where the Rebbe was living, how could he, a German, persuade the Lubavitchers that he wanted to save the Rebbe? Meanwhile, in America the Rebbe's followers had started the difficult process necessary for obtaining a visa for him and his family and close followers, but it had to be proven to the U.S. Immigration Service and the State Department that the Rebbe and his group were rabbis and therefore "professors" of Jewish theology who could find employment in America as teachers.

Near the end of November, new information passed on to Bloch finally led him to the building where the Rebbe was living. By this time, Rigg says, the Rebbe may also have learned that Bloch had been instructed to find him and could be trusted. The news was passed on to Washington, yet Bloch needed to figure out a safe way to get Schneersohn out of Warsaw and the Rebbe and his group still needed visas to enter the United States.

Bloch managed to get a truck and a wagon to take the Lubavitchers to a railroad station outside of Warsaw. There they would travel by train to Berlin and then go on to Riga, the capital of Latvia. Despite difficulties at a number of checkpoints, the Lubavitchers arrived in Berlin in the middle of December and the following day boarded a train for Riga.

The visa question was not solved so easily, and Rigg skillfully guides readers through the maze that was the immigration process in a period when the State Department's "indifference and hostility to Jewish immigrants" made the securing of a visa difficult, if not impossible. The lawyer hired by the Lubavitchers in America argued that the Immigration Act of 1924 would define the Rebbe and his rabbis as "clergymen," a non-quota status. In early January, the lawyer received word that visas would be issued to

the Rebbe and his followers, enabling them to fly from Riga to Stockholm and then travel to Goteborg from where they could sail to America.

The Lubavitchers were fortunate indeed. By the middle of 1940, Breckinridge Long, the State Department official appointed earlier that year to oversee immigrant visas, had tightened policies to such an extent that thousands and thousands of refugees from Hitler's Europe were prevented from coming to this country. "In summer 1942," Rigg writes, "when the opportunity arose to rescue 5,000 orphaned Jewish children stuck in Vichy France, Long actively prevented it. Even though Eleanor Roosevelt pushed hard for their rescue, Long's efforts delayed the action so long that, before any of the children could leave, the Germans sent most of them to their death in the East."

After a harrowing trip across the Atlantic, the Rebbe, his family and followers arrived in New York in March 1940. The Rebbe had been fortunate to have American help; most of the Hasidic leaders in Eastern Europe died in the Holocaust. The Rebbe thanked the members of the administration who had made his escape possible and worked to rescue other Lubavitchers. When it became clear that this would not happen, he focused his attention on the spiritual rescue of the Jews.

Rigg does a superb job helping us understand the Rebbe himself. He believed that the Holocaust was God's punishment of the Jews for not having been faithful enough; no efforts by any government to rescue Jews from the Nazis could take the place

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ALUMNI/AE

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———. "Book of the Equinox" [poem] IN *Flint Hills Review.* (v. 9/10, 2005)

1988—Jim Bowley. "Maximizing Performance: Technology Can Play an Important Role When Organizations Adopt a Pay-for-Performance Strategy" IN *Human Resource Executive Magazine.* (April, 2005)

FACULTY

L. Todd Hearon. "To a Nightingale," "Appalachian Lullaby," and "Chamber Music" [poems] IN *The Southern Review.* (Spring 2005, v. 41, no. 2)

———. "Banjo" and "South Carolina" [poems] IN *AGNI.* (Issue 62)

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of renewed worship and faith. His highest priority was to preach "the beginning of the 'final struggle' that would usher in the redemption of the nation of Israel"; the coming of the Messiah was at hand.

In my class on the Holocaust, we always listen to a tape of an Auschwitz survivor who reminds us that no one is all evil or all good. Events in the world take place, Joli Zalenis says, because each of us makes his or her own moral choices. Bryan Rigg's *Rescued from the Reich* shows us in extraordinary detail how

Rebbe Schneersohn survived the Holocaust because of a good deal of luck and because of the actions of many individuals on both sides of the Atlantic who, in a dangerous time, made their own moral choices to help him. ●

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