Jewish 'convent children' thanking their Christian saviors

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By Elzbieta Pyrich

An Israeli kibbutz convention has reunited Jewish children saved from the Holocaust with the nuns who protected them.

"Let this meeting reflect our deep respect for all the anonymous heroes and heroines who acted as their conscience dictated," said Benjamin Anolik, director of the Holocaust Museum at the first ever convention of "the convent children"-Jews who survived World War II hiding in convents in Poland, Belgium, France, Croatia, Slovenia and Slovakia.

The convension at the Beit Lochamel Hageotat Kibbutz (The House of the Ghetto Fighters) in Western Galilee was organized at the wish of the survivors who hoped to meet their saviors after 50 years. Around 200 "convent children" arrived, mostly from Poland. Two of the four Polish nuns and guests of honor--sisters Klara Jaroszynska and Bogumila Makowska--took an active part in rescuing Jewish children from the Holocaust.

"This convention is the most important Polish-Jewish meeting so far," said Lea Balint, the event"s co-organizer who found shelter in a Brwinow convent near Warsaw. She was five when her parents decided to put her in the convent, where she lived until the end of the war under an assumed name. She left for Israel in 1950. In the early 1960s, she started sending anonymous packages to the Brwinow convent but didn"t want to be recognized by the nuns. "We kept quiet because we were too busy gathering physical and spiritual strength to go on living like everyone else," she said during the convention. "We found it extremely hard to get in touch with our traumatic past. We all waited for the day when we would have the chance to thank our saviors. This process has been going on for 50 years in some people"s hearts," she added.

Balint visited Poland in 1984 when she accompanied a group of Hebrew University researchers from Jerusalem and took part in a nuns" convention. This was before Poland and Jerusalem had established official diplomatic ties.

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In convent archives, Balint found documents proving that Zegota--a Polish organization whose members rescued Jews from the Holocaust--had paid for her stay in the convent from 1943-45. Having returned home, she realized that Israeli historians had completely overlooked the story of the convent children. Together with Warsaw"s Jewish Historical Institute, she started searching for documents. In 1991, she received an MA for a thesis titled Children Without Identity. Over the following six years, she documented the fate of Jewish children in a book listing 2,500 names. The list of the survivors includes citizens of Israel, the United States and Western European countries as well as those who remained in Poland after the war.

The topic of children saved by convents is not free of controversy and was regarded almost as taboo for many years. Israeli researchers say that many children hidden away in convents would lose their identity and deny their Jewish roots when the war ended. Balint provides an explanation by claiming "the children didn"t want to be part of a nation that was constantly on the run, a nation forced to look for shelter from German soldiers and, often, from their Polish neighbors." She admits that if it hadn"t been for her father who survived the war, she would have probably stayed back in Brwinow and taken the convent vows.

Balint claims that she wrote the book to help those who remained in Poland after the war and forgot their Jewish roots, or those who were never aware of them, to recover their national identity.

The meeting in the kibbutz, which was founded in 1949 by former Jewish partisans and soldiers who fought in Poland and Lithuania to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, took place without any conflicts. Israeli hosts wanted to pay homage to all those who had saved Jewish children in those most difficult of times. "The historical balance of relations with Christianity isn"t very favorable for the Jewish nation. Perhaps this is why we should realize that as a nation we haven"t thanked the kind and noble people who, risking their own and their loved ones" lives, gave us shelter and rescued us from death. Those who saved but one life, saved the whole world," said former Tel-Aviv Mayor Shlomo Lahat.

Wojciech Adamiecki, Poland"s ambassador to Israel, also took part in the convention. He stressed that the nuns should be credited not only for saving the children but "for rescuing everyone from doubt, from the heart- and mind-damaging belief that crime and evil can win and reign forever."

The nuns were awarded commemorative medals bearing the inscription "for noble-mindedness, kindness and brotherhood."

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