

Good Shabbos Everyone. Hashem tells us this week in Parshas Re'eh, "For you are a holy people to Hashem, your G-d and Hashem has chosen you for Himself to be a treasured people, from among all the peoples on the face of the earth." (Devorim 14:2) One of the definitions of the word "holy" is "separate, set apart." We are truly a nation which enjoys a supernatural existence, with an extra special supervision from above. The following amazing true story illustrates that we are a "holy people to Hashem."

In September of 1939 the German army swept into Poland, uprooting Jewish families, synagogues, schools and communities. Whoever could escape to nearby Lithuania rushed for the border.

Lithuania served as a temporary refuge for thousands of Jews until it was taken over by Russia, and then fell to the Nazis. Among those who found temporary shelter within its borders were Rabbi Himmel and his family. He rejoiced that they had found refuge for the moment, but his insides quaked at the thought of the future. He feared that it was only a matter of time until the raging monster caught up with them.

Somehow, Rabbi Himmel found a way to send his young daughter, Tova Esther, to England. It was a tearful parting, but Tova Esther complied with her parents' wishes. They promised her that the separation would be temporary.

Later, while in England, Tova Esther learned of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Then, a year later, the German war machine took over. She mistakenly concluded that her family had all perished, and that she was now alone in the world.

In actual fact, the Soviets had been the Heaven's agent to keep her family alive by exiling them deep inside Siberia. There, between the permafrost and the frozen sky, the Himmel family continued to survive, but there was no way they could contact Tova Esther.

The name Tova means "good." Esther means "hidden." What an appropriate name for the young daughter cut off from her loving family! The youngster's whereabouts remained hidden from her family. Over time, all the good Jewish training and education she had received from them also became hidden. Most of all, from herself.

Alone in a foreign land, Tova Esther decided to show her appreciation to the country which had granted her asylum. She signed up as a volunteer for the British Army. Her work also gave her the satisfaction of taking some small measure of personal revenge against Germany. There was another advantage. She was provided with basic food rations, no small matter in war-torn England.

Other foreign nationals also joined the British forces out of gratitude. A certain gentile Johan van Duivenbode from Holland was among them. The name sounds formidable, but the translation is simple: postal pigeon.

During the Dutch War of Independence, the Spanish had surrounded the prince of the Netherlands. A loyal subject of the prince sent his postal pigeon with orders from the prince to open the dikes. The flood waters carried off the besieging enemy; the blockade was broken.

In gratitude, the prince elevated the owner of the carrier pigeon to the aristocracy. The new member of the nobility adopted the unusual surname to commemorate the act which had won him his title.

Johan, the refugee, was busy planning revenge against the Germans who had occupied his country. With a great deal of luck and hard work, he managed to escape Holland and reach the shores of Great Britain. He quickly volunteered to join the British Army. Johan's dream was to join the ground forces that would invade the continent and free Holland.

The young Dutchman took an interest in a fellow refugee, Tova Esther. They had much in common: exile, separation from family, fear, and fury at the Germans.

To the best of Tova Esther's knowledge, none of her immediate relatives had survived. Johan, on the other hand, often spoke of his many relatives back in Holland.

Johan realized his dream. As a naval officer, he participated in the invasion of Normandy. The war was eventually won. Johan was anxious to return home, taking Tova Esther with him. Another soul was lost to the Jewish People, or at least, very well concealed. Not only did Tova Esther become Dutch in every respect; she even changed her name to Ella.

Ella van Duivenbode sent her son Gijsbert (pronounced "Chizbort") to the nearby parochial school, which educated its students to be committed Catholics. Her husband, now an officer in the Dutch navy, spent much time at sea. Often he was away for months on end.

One day, while Johan was away at sea. Gijsbert came home from school to find his mother engulfed in tears. She refused to explain, saying only, "When your father comes home, we'll talk."

Johan returned, and Gijsbert felt the tension in his home rise. His parents, however, were careful to conceal their differences from him. When he tried to uncover the reason for the domestic stress, the youngster met a wall of silence. After a prolonged period of strain in the household, the Van Duivenbodes transferred Gijsbert from his Catholic parochial school to a secular school.

Years later, Johan Van Duivenbode told Gijsbert the secret story of that period in his life. Tova Esther's brothers had survived the Holocaust. One of them, described by Mr. Van Duivenbode as "ultra-Orthodox", had settled in the United States. This brother was unable to rest until he located his sister. All he had to go on was the last known address for her: Great Britain.

The brother searched and searched, becoming something of an international detective. A missing persons bureau for one person only. Tova Esther Himmel.

Eventually, the tireless brother traced his sister to a small town in Holland. He immediately set out to meet her in person. Fortunately, Johan, who was still in the Dutch Navy at the time, was at sea when the brother arrived. Tova Esther-Ella's brother burst into her home like a hurricane. After all these years, and so much effort! His only sister, daughter of a rabbi! How wonderful! And how tragic! His only sister, had cast her lot with the gentiles. Tova Esther was alive, but lost to her people.

The brother demanded that Tova Esther-Ella and her son leave Johan van Duivenbode's home. She refused. He spoke firmly, rebuking his sister for abandoning all that had been sacred to her family for endless generations. Then he left, slamming the door. That was the day Gijsbert came home from school to find his mother in tears. The unexpected meeting with her brother tugged at long-buried memories. Tova Esther-Ella was no longer content. When Johan returned, his wife presented her request. She would stay with him, but there must be a limit to their denial of her religion. At the very least. Gijsbert must not study in a school so zealously dedicated to the Catholic religion. He must grow up just like any other gentile. Johan resisted his wife's plea, but eventually gave in.

Gijsbert knew nothing of these negotiations; he was too young to be drawn into the whirlpool of an identity crisis. When he reached the age of twelve, his mother revealed two facts to him.

First, she told her only child that she was a member of the People who had stood at Sinai, at the Revelation of the Torah. Then she told him a fearsome secret. She had cancer. "What does that mean?" Gijsbert asked his mother. "It means," she explained sadly, "That the G-d of my ancestors is angry with me because I turned my back on my religion. But, I'll return to Him, and He will heal me. He wants repentance." She did not separate from her husband, however, and didn't change her lifestyle. It could be, says Gijsbert, that his mother stopped eating food cooked in the non-kosher Van Duivenbode pots and pans. Perhaps she stopped doing melachos. prohibited labor, on the Sabbath.

Tova Esther-Ella passed away when Gijsbert was about twelve and a half. In keeping with her request, she was buried in a Jewish cemetery. Gijsbert continued to grow, under his father's tutelage, as part of a fervent; Christian extended family. This information that his mother had been Jewish remained tucked away in his mind as a hazy bit of knowledge and nothing more.

When Gijsbert finished high school, he decided to put his artistic talents to practical use. He became the apprentice of the architect responsible for maintaining the ancient churches in Amsterdam. The huge murals that decorate Amsterdam cathedrals are subject to cracking and fading with the years. Preserving the requires constant restoration work. The task demands a great sense of responsibility and offers much satisfaction. Gijsbert gave himself over entirely his work. For some projects, he spent months on the scaffolding, with his he upturned, repairing crack after crack with his paintbrush. After two years of work without a vacation, he decided the time had come to take a break.

One of his friends suggested a vacation in an exotic locale. He recommended a working vacation on a kibbutz in Israel. He explained: "I volunteer to work on the kibbutz, and return, we receive free room and board. "Why not?" answered Gijsbert. The young Dutch painter arrived in Holy Land and soon acclimated to life kibbutz. The people were pleasant, work easy, and it was a wonderful court His friend, a Dutch gentile, met a whose family were members of kibbutz and decided to make his way there.

What would be with Gijsbert? He knew he was Jewish and he lived in the Holy Land. Would he return to the faith of his fathers? *to be continued...* **Good Shabbos Everyone.**