

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's parsha Vayishlach, the Torah tells us how Yakov fought with a *malach* - an angel until the break of dawn. On the simplest level, the verses are describing how Yakov had a knock down, drag out fight with an angel. After fighting, the angel gave Yakov a new name, Yisroel. The name Yisroel can also denote "Yashar K[el]" meaning "direct to G-d."; every Jew can have an individual relationship with Hashem, a Jew needs no intermediaries.

This week we begin to read the amazing true story of Shammai Davidovics as told by his daughter Tova Lebovits.

"My father taught me to fight for life. He could not speak about what happened to him during the war, nor of his family who perished. He kept a life-long self-imposed silence, which I painfully learned to accept despite my need to know.

Over the years, survivors and people he had saved would find us, and then I would hear their tales. It is only before his death that my father broke his silence and substantiated the stories my brothers and I had collected. And it was only then that he answered, painfully, some of our most heartrending questions.

My father was born in 1912 to a chassidic family in Danilev (near Hust), a small Czechoslovakian town in the Carpathian Mountains. Like those around him, my father went to cheder (Torah school), spoke Yiddish, and led a religious life. Yet his curiosity and adventurous nature led him to seek knowledge in the big world outside the shtetl (village). He studied Hebrew and other secular subjects.

At age 16, he was accepted to a German gymnasium (high school) in Berne, while he continued his Torah studies on the side as well. From there he joined the Czechoslovakian army, and then was one of the few Jews accepted to the University of Budapest. By the end of 1943, when the German army invaded Hungary, he was fluent in 12 languages, had completed his PhD. in sociology, and had received rabbinic ordination from Beit Hamidrash Lerabanim in Budapest.

At the start, the Germans deported only those Jews who did not have Hungarian or Czech citizenship papers. Unfortunately, most Jews, especially those living in small villages, though having lived there for centuries, did not have such papers. My father and several of his friends organized an underground forgery ring, where they began producing forged citizenship papers and other necessary documents for Jews. They were financially backed by wealthy Jews, and worked with Raul Wallenberg, providing him with the needed documentation.

At this time my father also became a master of disguises, taking on various identities when necessary for his mission. Fortunately he looked Aryan, spoke a fluent German, and unlike some who could not see the writing on the wall, he believed that these times required desperate measures.

His exploits were described to us by several survivors of my father's hometown of Danilev, and were later corroborated by my father.

In those critical days of the German invasion, my father collected all the names of the Jews of Danilev without citizenship papers (half the town was related) and worked as fast as possible to forge those papers, several hundred in all. He knew that time was of the essence. It took almost five days to reach Danilev, and he knew the German army was now deporting Jews of nearby regions and would get to his hometown and family within weeks. The entire town, including his family, had been herded onto cattle cars. With papers in hand, he set out to Danilev in great haste. As he neared his region, he heard that the Germans had worked much faster than anticipated and had most probably reached Danilev.

He arrived at his hometown too late. The entire population, including his family, had been herded onto cattle cars and the trains were about to depart. When my father saw the German soldiers guarding the trains and taunting his people, he realized there was only one thing to do...

On the scene arrives an impeccably dressed high-ranking German official. He walks with a quick sure gait and the self-confidence of a haughty personage. And he is furious. He approaches one of the guards, who immediately salutes him, and in harsh tones demands to see the highest-ranking officer in charge. He sends the guards scuffling off to obey his orders.

A perplexed and harried officer quickly appears, and thus ensues a humiliating scolding and berating of the mortified officer in charge. This inevitably draws the attention of those around. "Do you realize you have blatantly disobeyed and violated military orders?" yells the arrogant stranger as he slams a stack of papers in front of the officer. This stranger was my father. The Jews who recognized him could not believe their eyes. On that day, through sheer chutzpah, he succeeded in reversing the decree. The Jews of Danilev were released from the cattle cars and returned to their homes (what was left after the looting, that is). They were now all legal citizens... *continued next week.* **Good Shabbos Everyone.**