

HAARETZ

A Righteous Gentile (1925 - 2015) and the Israeli colonel she saved

Wanda Bulik, then a 17- year-old Polish girl, took in a Jewish boy of three in 1943 and raised him as her son until after the war. He grew up to be IDF Col. (res.) Matti Greenberg, who last month went to her funeral.

By Ofer Aderet | May 11, 2015 | 3:21 AM

In 1943, when she was on her way on the train to her English and dance lesson, Wanda Bulik, a 17- year-old Polish girl, noticed a cute little boy of three who looked like he was lost. "He has traveled back and forth three times already," the conductor on the train between Warsaw, where she studied, and the suburb Wesola, where she lived, told her. The little curly blond boy smiled at her. He held a package in his hand in which there was a note with his name, Tolek Weinstein (Wajnsztajn), along with a request to take care of him. Inside the package were clothes.

Bulik took the boy home to her parents. "He was so handsome. What else could I do?" she said afterwards. She told her parents: "He will be my child." When it turned out the boy was circumcised, her parents were scared at first, knowing the fate of Poles who hid Jews from the Nazis and were caught by the Gestapo. In the end they gave in and agreed to take him in, even though they already had five children of their own. "He slept in my room. I bathed him. Dried him off and sewed clothes for him," said Bulik.

Tolek called her mother. She treated him as her son. A policeman who was a family friend would warn them of German raids and searches. That is how the Jewish boy survived the Holocaust in the home of a Polish family. "I was one of the children of the family. I grew up there as a Polish child in every way, I went to first grade," said Tolek last week. He is now 75 years old, having grown up to become a colonel in the Israel Defense Forces with the name Matti Greenberg.

As a child, he would play in the Bulik family's bakery. "We would jump on the flour sacks. Once I fell inside them. I came out completely white," he remembers. "I also remember the potatoes with butter and dill. And sour milk – the taste of my childhood," says Greenberg.

"He would come close and give me his head for a caress, he yearned for love," said Bulik's brother later. "It was impossible to abandon the child. If they have to kill us, then kill us," was the family's attitude, he said.

Leaving home for Israel

In 1946, after the war was over, a car stopped outside the door of the Bulik home. Out came a Polish army officer in uniform. It was Rabbi Yeshayahu Drucker, who was traveling all over Poland looking for Jewish children who were hidden by Christian families, in orphanages, convents and monasteries to send them to Israel as part of the "Youth Aliyah" program.



Matti Greenberg;

Photo by www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl

The separation was difficult. Tolek did not want to leave the family that had raised him and saved his life. After great efforts to convince them, the Bulik family realized he could expect a brighter future outside Poland. "Oh God, so many tears were shed there. My mother cried, my father cried. I screamed from pain," said Wanda Bulik. Recalls Greenberg, "Of course I didn't want to go, and I screamed. But in the end they convinced me. To ride in a car, for the first time in my life – that was something special for me".

The Bulik family was the first not to ask for any money for the child, said Drucker. In fact they refused to accept any payment. Their only condition was that he not be sent to an orphanage, but go to a family, he said.

Druker connected the child with the Greenbergs, Jews who lost their own son in the Warsaw Ghetto, and who survived the war by living outside the ghetto as Christians under false identities. They told Tolek they were his real parents and took him with them – first to France, where they lived with over 100 child Holocaust survivors whom Lena Kűchler Silberman, a Polish Jew who survived the war by posing as a Catholic, gathered, rehabilitated and later brought to Israel. "There I received my Zionist education and learned Hebrew," said Greenberg. He also chose his new name, Matti, there.

In 1947, Greenberg made aliyah to pre-state Israel with his adoptive parents as part of the illegal immigration during the British Mandate, along with thousands of other new immigrants equipped with forged documents. He knew nothing about his biological parents; he did not even know he was adopted.

"I grew up with the baggage of abandonment and separation, but everything was very, very repressed and we never talked about it," he says. When he was only 12, he won first prize in a poetry writing competition on the subject of Mother's Day run by Haaretz's children's newspaper. His poem was titled "The song of the orphan."



Wanda Bulik and Matti Greenberg

Photo by www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl

Greenberg became a career army officer, worked in the IDF's military history department, among other posts, reached the rank of colonel, married and raised a family in Israel.

Cut off for 50 years

His contact with Wanda Bulik, the girl who saved his life, was cut off for 50 years. Only in 1995 did they meet again. It was after the documentary "Wanda's List," which Greenberg participated in, was broadcast at the same time on Channel 1 in Israel and on Polish television, telling the story of Jewish children like him who were saved by Poles.

After the film was shown Greenberg received a letter that changed his life. A Polish woman named Antonina Liro recognized him and wrote him. "I am already an old woman, but I nonetheless hope I will have the opportunity to see you, since I have so much to tell. I had a pretty album with pictures of your family, but I regret it was burned during the Warsaw uprising," she wrote.

A few days later he was already in Warsaw, where he met Liro – and then Wanda Bulik. She told him how she had tried to locate him all these years, but did not know his new name. The connection with his two Polish saviors was forged again, and has been kept since. It also shed light on the missing chapters in his biography.

It seems Greenberg was born in 1939, the only child of Mieczyslaw (Mietek) and Cyla Wajnsztajn (Weinstein), a Jewish couple who lived in Warsaw. After the war started they were sent to the Warsaw Ghetto. Before they were killed, most likely during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, it seems they somehow managed to send him out of the ghetto. In the end he wound up in the hands of Liro, a friend of the family, whose first husband, Yaakov (Yolek) Kamieniecki, was Jewish.

When she could not find any proper shelter for them, Liro took Greenberg, then three years old, to the main train station in Warsaw and left him there. "I thought if I put him on the train, maybe someone would show compassion and take him. I couldn't leave him with me. There was no chance for you and I to survive," she later explained to him. Wanda Bulik then took him from the train. Since the meeting with the two women, Greenberg kept in touch with them and their families. A few months ago, when his grandson was born, he sent Bulik pictures and wrote her: "This is your great-grandchild".

A memento

Last month Greenberg went to Poland once again, this time to participate in Bulik's funeral. He received a memento from her daughter Eva: A picture of himself as a child with a note he had sent to Wanda after they were separated. "She kept it for 70 years," said Greenberg.

The story of his rescue by Bulik is presented in a virtual exhibit of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which tells the story of Polish heroes who risked their lives to save Jewish children. 'Yad Vashem' Holocaust memorial center already recognizes some 6,500 Polish "Righteous Among the Nations," given to gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. In Poland there are those who say the real number is much higher.

"I am aware of Kielce and Jedwabne," said Greenberg, speaking about two Polish towns where the Poles held murderous pogroms against their Jewish neighbors after the Second World War ended and they returned to their former homes. "But my main memory is from the Bulik family. Others had a different experience. There is nothing you can do. There were ones like this and ones like that," he says.

Wanda Bulik, who was recognized as one of "The Righteous Among the Nations" by 'Yad Vashem', had a daughter who survived her. Her son died young. The family bakery, which continues to carry the Bulik name, is still operated by family members who moved to Canada – and is now a kosher bakery.

Greenberg is now trying to find more information on his biological parents, Mieczyslaw (Mietek) and Cyla Wajnsztajn (Weinstein), whom he does not remember. He has never even seen their picture. "Antonina Liro said I am a copy of my father," he said.

Anyone who has any information on Matti Greenberg's parents, Mieczyslaw (Mietek) and Cyla Wajnsztajn (Weinstein), who lived at 17/15

Chlodna Street in Warsaw, then on Walicuw Street in the Warsaw Ghetto; or on the family of attorney Yaakov (Yolesh, Yolek) Kamieniecki,

who was Antonina Liro's first husband, who moved to England, and who may be a relative of Greenberg's parents; or about the descendants of Anna Nakson from Haifa, who in 1957 provided testimony to 'Yad Vashem' on Greenberg's father – please contact: ofer.aderet@haaretz.co.il

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