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Catholic priest serves as he honors his Jewish roots

Donald Snyder | Apr. 17, 2009

Fr. Gregorcz Pawlowski at St. Peter's Church in Jaffa, Israel (Jonathan Bloom)

JAFFA, ISRAEL

Fr. Gregorcz Pawlowski insists he can be both a Roman Catholic priest and a Jew at the same time.

The 77-year-old Holocaust survivor says Mass and tends to other spiritual needs of the small Polish-speaking Catholic community of St. Peter's Church in Jaffa. He also fasts on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, and plans to be buried in a Jewish cemetery in his native Poland. His gravestone is already there.

As if to affirm his double identity his modest apartment at 4 Ben Zvi St. in Jaffa has two names on the door: Gregorcz Pawlowski, and beneath it in Hebrew, Zvi Griner, his birth name. These two names testify to a man who has taken two seemingly incompatible religious journeys.

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The slightly built priest described these journeys in his apartment, speaking in Polish through an interpreter, his voice a monotone, his face expressionless, seemingly covering the horrors of the story he was to convey.

Griner was born a Jew in the small Polish town of Zamosc, raised in an observant family. His world was shattered in the fall of 1942 when he was 11. Invading German troops ordered the Jews of Zamosc to leave and made them march without food or water to nearby Izbica, where they were all massacred.

Griner, however, hid with his mother and two sisters in a basement until the Germans discovered them. Griner escaped into an alley without saying goodbye. The three women were later executed in Izbica's Jewish cemetery and buried there in a mass grave. Earlier, Griner's father had vanished from a German work site; his older brother, Chaim, had escaped to Russia.

As a young boy, Griner survived using a forged Catholic baptismal certificate given to him by a Jewish teenager. He begged for food and shelter from area peasants. He told them he had escaped from a German labor camp, never revealing that he was Jewish.

An elderly couple, reading his baptismal certificate, taught him how to make the sign of the cross and recite Christian prayers.

In late 1944, Russian troops drove the Germans out of Poland. By then Griner was badly debilitated by lack of food and related illnesses.

A local doctor saved his life, placing him in a Roman Catholic orphanage run by the Polish Red Cross. He attended a school run by nuns.

Searching for meaning, Griner said he became "zealous" in his pursuit of Christian studies, soon embracing Catholicism. "I came from a deeply religious family and I desperately wanted religion in my life again," he said, stressing that he did not want to be seen as different from his Catholic classmates.

From that embrace of the Catholic faith came other decisions to deepen his commitment, and the path to the priesthood seemed to follow naturally, he said. "I just kept learning and going along and I went into the profession that made sense."

Michael Schudrich, the chief rabbi of Poland and a friend of Griner, affirmed this seemingly destined road to the Catholic priesthood. Griner was, in effect, saying he was part of a greater Catholic family so it seemed like a smart thing to become a priest. "It was like he went into the family business -- he didn't have a vision on the way to Damascus."

Griner took the name on his forged baptismal certificate and thus became "Pawlowski." He was ordained in 1958, but didn't reveal his Jewish past until eight years later.

Thousands of Jews were baptized during the war to save their lives, and many still don't know that their parents were Jewish, according to Szewach Weiss, an authority on Polish Jewry. Another Jew who became a priest, Fr. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel of Lublin, didn't learn he was Jewish until 12 years after he was ordained.

"Lately we have been receiving many letters from Poles -- including from a priest -- saying they just discovered they are Jews and hope we can tell them more about their families murdered during the Holocaust," said Mark Shraberman, head of the archives division at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

Unlike Jews who were baptized as infants, Pawlowski always knew that he was Jewish.

"I began to become aware that I had not admitted who I am and who my people are," the priest acknowledged during an interview. He said he decided to tell his story for the first time in 1966 when he wrote an article about his life for a Polish Catholic weekly. In the article he said that although he was a Catholic priest, his Jewish identity remained as strong as ever.

"Some Jews may see a betrayer in me," he wrote, "but I feel as Jewish as they are."

That feeling hasn't changed.

"I'm a priest, but also Jewish," he once told a rabbi on a visit to relatives in the United States as he took part in a Jewish religious service.

"Jesus was the messiah and he was also Jewish and so were his apostles," he said recently.

Pawlowski yearned to go to Israel and immigrated there in 1970. Upon his arrival he was embraced by his older brother, Chaim, whom he hadn't seen in nearly three decades. Chaim, an Orthodox Jew who had moved to Israel after the war, first contacted his brother after reading a reprint of Pawlowski's 1966 article.

Pawlowski, meanwhile, has remained in Israel where he has church authorization to minister to the Polish Catholic community. He recently explained he has two homelands, Poland and Israel, and two peoples, Polish and Jewish. He said, "I'm a really rich person. Maybe Jews don't know who I am, but I know who I am."

Before Chaim's death, Pawlowski and his brother built in 1974 a memorial to their mother and sisters and the other Jews murdered in the Jewish cemetery in Izbica. A local gravedigger gave the brothers an idea of the location where their mother was killed. Pawlowski has already put his own gravestone in this cemetery where he wants to be buried with the rest of his family.

"I ran away from my mother and sisters and someday I want to come back to them," he said with a tinge of emotion.

He has asked Rabbi Schudrich to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, at his funeral.

Pawlowski showed a photograph of his gravestone with an image of loaves and fishes taken from a mosaic in a church in the Galilee symbolizing the miracles performed by Jesus.

The gravestone has no cross.

Donald Snyder is a freelance writer who worked at NBC for 27 years as a news producer. He retired from the network in 2003.

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