

Books

Mr. Batt's Way

By Miriam Batt Halpern

Jerusalem, Israel, 2000

144 pages

Reviewed by Julius Berman



Many years ago, I returned to Hartford, Connecticut to participate in a celebratory event at the Yeshiva of Hartford at which the late Rabbi Pinchas Teitz—one of the giants in the rejuvenation of Orthodox Jewry in America—was the main speaker. I recall Rabbi Teitz noting that in the past, when he visited someone arriving on these shores from Europe and saw a *Shas* in the bookcase, he would usually be informed that it belonged to that person's grandfather. Rabbi Teitz went on to remark that “nowadays” under the same circumstances, he is informed that it belongs to that occupant's grandson.

In a sense, that observation reflects what in effect was the conversion of

Mr. Berman, an honorary president of the Orthodox Union, past president of the Conference of Presidents, and chairman of the board of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, is a native of Hartford, Connecticut and was a member of the founding class of the Yeshiva of Hartford.

Hartford from what could have been a historical relic “Jewishly” into a vibrant, growing Torah community. One important contributor was Charles Batt, the subject of *Mr. Batt's Way*, a book lovingly written by his youngest daughter, Mrs. Miriam Batt Halpern, who beautifully conveys how this transformation came about.

Looking back to the Batt era in Hartford, one may be honestly puzzled over the fact that Charles Batt—who liked to call himself “Mr.” although he was an ordained rabbi—was able to accomplish so much in a lifetime. Blessed with neither a captivating charisma nor an overpowering sense of rhetoric, Mr. Batt, by dint of personality, dedication and persistence, made an indelible impression on hundreds of families over the years. Indeed, the success of Mr. Batt's efforts demonstrates what Mrs. Halpern appropriately notes is the “power of one person, power of love and dedication, and the difference that one Jew can make in the lives of an entire community.”

There was also another critical, and indeed indispensable, ingredient to Mr. Batt's success, which may not have been sufficiently developed in the book: the partnership of Mr. Batt and his wife, Minnie in the endeavor to convert Hartford into what is called in our tradition an *ir v'eim b'Yisrael* (a term used to connote a highly spiritual city). Mrs. Batt was much more than a supporter of her husband's communal activities. Their effort reflected a truly equal partnership, in every sense of the word.

The book points out that although Mr. Batt was fully involved in developing a successful business, his every spare moment was devoted to teaching Torah to individuals. Be they elementary school-age kids, teenagers or even

his contemporaries, no group was too small or too large to benefit from Mr. Batt's time and attention.

Mr. Batt was the unpaid rabbi of the Young Israel of Hartford for 25 years. To this day, people remember the warmth that pervaded the *shul*. But it went beyond that; the Batts always had teenagers over to their home for Shabbat groups, where Mr. Batt would insist on studying a text—be it Mishlei, Pirkei Avot or *parashat hashavua*—followed by a little snack and then communal singing of songs appropriate for the Shabbat atmosphere.

Mr. Batt was also involved with education on a national level particularly with Torah Umesorah, having founded the organization's national PTA, as well as its endowment fund. But his first loyalty always remained the youth of Hartford. He was instrumental in sending many Yeshiva of Hartford graduates to yeshivah high schools out of the city, particularly in Baltimore, Cleveland and New York, and his continuing interest in the growth of each student sent out-of-town was limitless.

One of his pet projects was to contact a few of these students (including the author of this review) about a month or two prior to a Yom Tov and inform them that they would be delivering the sermons at the Young Israel of Hartford during the holiday, so they'd better start preparing. Of course, in the event that a student needed help preparing the sermon, Mr. Batt was there to assist him. In this manner, he aided the student in developing the ability to communicate thoughts through speeches, a skill that is helpful later in life, and critical to attaining success in many professions. Mr. Batt's efforts locally were by no means limited to the *shul*. His other

primary area of devotion was the Yeshiva of Hartford, where he was president for 18 years and heavily involved with for many more.

Mrs. Halpern also notes that the “familial” aspect of the yeshiva was unique, with no clear lines of division between teachers, supporters and administrators. All became part of the extended yeshiva family, and shared one common goal: to participate in developing young boys and girls into mature adults who would make their academic and professional mark in the world while remaining true to their religious roots.

Even the Orthodox Union was a beneficiary of Mr. Batt’s efforts. I recall that shortly after being elected president of the OU in 1978, I received a call from him in which he said that if the organization considered itself a Torah institution, it should open its meetings with a *dvar Torah*. That innovation has lasted to this very day.

He called me subsequently to urge another project upon the Union: our participation in the *Mishnah Yomit* concept, noting that being a union of synagogues, the OU was in a unique position to do this effectively. Again, we successfully adopted a Batt proposal, developing it into our monthly publication, *Luach & Limud*, which continues to provide a daily dose of Torah learning to subscribers throughout the world.

Mrs. Halpern sums up her father best when she writes the following:

Charles Batt changed the lives of many. Having come in contact with him changed even people who met him casually. He affected others in a positive way just by being himself: a sincere, honest Jew who accepted life and tried each day to be the best he could be, a man who loved Judaism and wanted everyone to partake in a taste of its splendor.

Mr. Batt’s Way is a relatively small book that does not pretend to be a full-blown biography. However, while conveying the highlights of Charles Batt’s life, it certainly demonstrates the power that a dedicated couple can have in molding the religious character of an entire community. **JA**

The Man Who Stopped The Trains To Auschwitz

George Mantello, El Salvador, and Switzerland’s Finest Hour

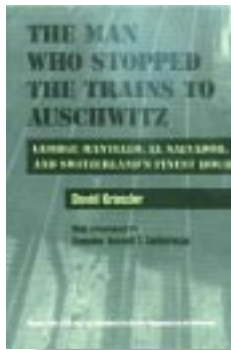
By David Kranzler, with a Foreword by Senator Joseph I. Lieberman

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341 pages

Reviewed by Shlomo Slonim



This volume recounts the extraordinary deeds of an extraordinary man during the darkest hours of Jewish history, when satanic figures sought to totally destroy every Jewish community in fulfillment of the Final Solution. It reveals how one person, George Mantello, managed, in the most remarkable circumstances, to save from certain death the remnants of an entire community, that of Budapest, with its surviving 140,000 Jews. By mid-1944, half of the Jewish population had already been transported to Auschwitz and massacred, and Eichmann and his Gestapo henchmen were fiendishly intent on completing the destruction of the last major Jewish community in occupied Europe. Their resolve weakened not a whit even as the Nazi regime, facing imminent defeat by the concerted Allied onslaught from east and west, was in its last gasps.

The case related in this volume is unique because of its scope and, beyond that, because it demonstrates what might have been done much earlier, on a more massive scale, to rescue European Jewry had the leaders of the Allied powers and Jews in positions of

responsibility acted with comparable commitment, devotion and determination. In particular, as the author points out, Mantello’s achievements put the lie to the thesis enunciated by William D. Rubinstein in his book, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Britain, of course, compounded matters by slamming shut the doors of *Eretz Yisrael* at the moment of greatest need, when multitudes of Jews might yet have been saved had they been able to reach that safe haven. In this manner, Britain was almost as complicit in Hitler’s destruction of European Jewry as were the Arabs at whose instigation the infamous “White Paper” was issued. Just how callous the British attitude could be in the face of the most horrid act of butchery that the world has ever seen is perhaps best revealed by the remark of British Deputy Prime Minister Clement Atlee, in 1942. Privy as he was to all the intelligence coming out of Eastern Europe, he could still declare, “The Jews are always desirous of putting themselves at the head of the queue of the suffering”!

In 1943 and 1944, when the machinery for destroying humans en masse was operating at full blast, Allied leaders, fully informed of the facts, could not even spare a few bombs to destroy the gas chambers and the railroads that were being used to transport tens of thousands daily into Auschwitz. This failure to act was itself a crime against humanity. It represented a deliberate decision to desist from interfering with, and frustrating, further implementation of the Nazis’ systematic program of genocide. Winning the war, quite clearly, did not encompass saving Jewish lives en masse. Regrettably, public opinion in the Allied countries was never sufficiently informed or powerful to compel their governments to act to interdict the transports into Auschwitz.

What happened in Switzerland in 1944, as described by Kranzler, pres-

ents a stark contrast to this dismal picture. Mass popular protests were staged, objecting strenuously to the continued deportation of the Jews to Auschwitz and condemning the Hungarian government for its role. These protests were led by church and communal leaders who, in turn, had been energized by Mantello (not, be it noted, by the Swiss government). Grassroots Swiss pressure led the Hungarian government to suspend further deportations, despite the

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threats and blandishments of Eichmann and his cohorts. Thus, in what was perhaps the greatest single act of rescue, the last remnants of Budapest Jewry were spared the fate of their brethren, thanks in no small measure to the dramatic intervention of one determined individual.

Mantello's career up to the war hardly presaged the talents, vision and tenacity which he would summon to

fulfill a central role in the mass rescue of Jews. Born in 1901 in Transylvania to a well-to-do Jewish family, George Mandl (he subsequently changed his name to Mantello) received a basic Jewish education in the town of Klausenberg, attended a commercial high school for three years and studied at a military college during World War I. At the end of that conflict he engaged in business, primarily in the field of banking and finance. As a member of a Revisionist youth group, he visited *Eretz Yisrael* in the 1920s and even hiked with the group from Haifa to Jerusalem. Upon his return to Europe, he settled in Romania and became the manager of a bank. His connections with non-Jews in the business world subsequently facilitated his escape from the clutches of the Germans and his efforts to rescue other Jews. In 1942 he moved from Romania to Switzerland and, as a result of his friendship with the El Salvadoran ambassador in that country, was appointed first secretary (honorary) at the El Salvadoran embassy. This conferred on him diplomatic status with the right to travel anywhere and enjoy diplomatic immunity. From being a shrewd and successful businessman, Mantello now became a one-man dynamo working tirelessly to bring Jews to safety. He performed numerous miracles of rescue, but his greatest achievement was his intervention on behalf of Budapest's remaining Jews in 1944, which, as the title of this book denotes, "stopped the trains to Auschwitz."

The author, Professor David Kranzler, is to be commended for bringing to light, in absorbing detail, an exalted chapter in human resolve and courage. The book, whose importance is justly highlighted by Senator Joseph Lieberman in his foreword, is indeed "powerful and moving." Few would have heard of Mantello before the publication of this book; none who read the account will ever forget the deeds of a single dedicated hero in the most harrowing period in human history. 