

Holocaust Hero: Solomon Schonfeld

By David Kranzler



Ktav Publishing House
New Jersey, 2004

289 pages

Reviewed by Pinchas Stolper

The subject of Orthodox rescue efforts during the Holocaust has long been neglected, distorted and denigrated. Dr. David Kranzler, an accomplished researcher, historian and writer has, through ten chilling books, revealed the heroic and creative efforts of Orthodox individuals and organizations that played a critical role in one of the most horrific sagas of modern Jewish history. Most revealing of all was the ideological struggle between the secular Jewish establishment and the Orthodox activists over whether saving lives at all costs is the highest priority. In all of Dr. Kranzler's books, based on carefully documented evidence, the reader is tortured by the question, How many of the six million would have survived had the Orthodox forces carried the day?

Rabbi Stolper, founding director of NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth), is a former executive vice president of the Orthodox Union.

In his book *Holocaust Hero: Solomon Schonfeld*, Dr. Kranzler offers a fascinating portrait of one of the most remarkable heroes of the Holocaust, a young British rabbi who rescued thousands of Jews during the tragic years from 1938 to 1948. Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld, a graduate of the Nitra Yeshiva in Slovakia, was no doubt inspired to get involved in rescue work by his former *rosh yeshivah*, Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl, who ultimately became known as “the genius of rescue.”

Officials were impressed with the young rabbi who seemed committed to saving lives with no thought to his own comfort or ego.

Rabbi Schonfeld brought to England over four thousand children, as well as rabbis, teachers, ritual slaughterers and other religious functionaries. He placed his charges in kosher homes and provided the youth with a Jewish education. In addition, Rabbi Schonfeld tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to persuade the British government to bomb Auschwitz. This fascinating biography, with a focus on his rescue efforts, includes stories illustrating his struggles with the assimilationist Anglo-Jewish leadership, as well as forty vignettes by individuals he rescued.

Who was this rabbi—this one-man, large-scale rescue machine? What impelled him to risk his peace of mind, his health—and, at times, his life—in order to ceaselessly pursue the Divine commandment of *hatzalat nefashot*, the physical and spiritual rescue of his fellow Jews?

A formidable young man with a quick mind and limitless energy, Rabbi Schonfeld was able to accomplish so

much by sheer dint of his personality. He preferred to work as a one-man committee. He was outspoken and sometimes unpopular because of his single-minded views on rescue and Judaism, but his personal charm and diplomacy enabled him to be impressively effective.

At the tender age of twenty-two, Rabbi Schonfeld succeeded his father as rabbi of a small Orthodox congregation and as principal of England's first Jewish day school. Just six years later, in 1938, when Jewish cries for help came from Nazi-dominated Germany and Austria, he jumped into the fray as an outstanding rescuer.

In the fall of 1938, following Kristallnacht, Julius Steinfeld, a communal leader in Austria, called Rabbi Schonfeld, pleading with him to assemble a children's transport to England for Vienna's Orthodox Jewish youth. Rabbi Schonfeld met with Yaakov Rosenheim and Harry Goodman, president and secretary of World Agudath Israel respectively, but even before they could decide on a strategy, he boarded a train to Vienna. Rabbi Schonfeld helped Steinfeld organize a *kindertransport* of close to 300 youngsters, providing the British government with his personal guarantee in order to secure their entry.

Even before the *kindertransport*, Rabbi Schonfeld brought 1,200 German rabbis, *shochetim*, teachers and other Jewish communal workers and their families to England, over the objections of many in the established English Jewish community. Rabbi Schonfeld worked closely with Chief Rabbi Joseph P. Hertz, who allowed him to use the newly established rescue organization, the Chief Rabbi's Religious Emergency Council (CRREC), as a convenient and effective lever. The chief rabbi's name opened many doors and helped dampen the inter-

nal opposition to his rescue efforts. Moreover, the chief rabbi was in a position to say to government officials that he, and not the Jewish agencies, should be the one to properly determine how many rabbis and teachers were needed in Britain.

Rabbi Schonfeld proved to be a charismatic figure, developing an excellent relationship with some British ministries, where officials were impressed with the young rabbi who seemed committed to saving lives with no thought to his own comfort or ego. Remarkably, ministries that proved impervious to the pleas of other Jewish relief organizations could not ignore Rabbi Schonfeld.

Rabbi Schonfeld's creative streak was manifest in all of his endeavors and frequently enabled him to fulfill his objectives, regardless of the circumstances. His offbeat approach often brought him into conflict with the assimilationist Anglo-Jewish establishment, which hated making waves—fearing it would create anti-Semitism. The secular Jewish community preferred, for example, to place the Jewish refugee children in non-Jewish homes, regardless of the consequences.

Rabbi Schonfeld's objective, however, was to keep Orthodox children together in Orthodox homes or kosher hostels. He brought older youth to England to study in *yeshivot* and had them participate in Orthodox youth groups such as Chevre ben Zakkai and Zeirei (Agudah). He established Yeshiva Ohr Yisroel for youths aged sixteen to eighteen, who were ineligible for the *kindertransports*, and reestablished Rabbi Moshe Schneider's Frankfurt yeshiva in London for additional refugee students. Rabbi Schonfeld's methods preserved the children's Jewishness, and eventually many of them became teachers and leaders in the Jewish community.

Just before the Blitz, during the mass evacuation from London, tens of thousands of British children had to be moved to the countryside. Rabbi Schonfeld met the challenge by creating a Jewish enclave for more than 550 youths in non-Jewish villages on the outskirts of London. The town of Shefford was the central hub for five villages that took in his children. Rabbi Schonfeld, in his congenial way,

was able to deal with villagers who had never seen Jews before, persuading them to host Orthodox children and make them feel at home.

To foster a Jewish atmosphere, Rabbi Schonfeld set up an organization called the National Council for Religious Education (NCRE), which was responsible for establishing and elevating Jewish life in evacuation centers and other communities. He raised funds and supplied those communities with teachers—rabbis and functionaries he had rescued from the hell of Europe. He supplied his charges with prayer books, matzot, *etrogim* and other religious articles.

In 1940, when some 15,000 male German refugees were placed by Britain in several crude internment camps following the fall of France and the threat of a German invasion, Rabbi Schonfeld made a number of official visits to the camps to improve the facilities and provide the Orthodox refugees with kosher food. He was even successful in securing the release of 1,000 internees on various grounds.

During 1942 and 1943, he won more than 1,000 visas to Mauritius for imperiled Jews. Although the Jews never actually went to this island off Madagascar, the papers were recognized by the Nazis as a form of protection, and this enabled many to escape to Eretz Yisrael and other havens.

In 1943, even as World War II raged, Rabbi Schonfeld collected thousands of cans of kosher food in preparation for post-war distribution to survivors. In launching such a successful food drive, he overcame the fears of some Jews who felt that collecting food when the country had instituted rationing would make them unpopular with their fellow Britons.

After the war, Rabbi Schonfeld brought out hundreds of hidden Jewish children from Communist Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. Six feet tall, athletic and handsome, Rabbi Schonfeld appeared like an angel to the orphans he collected from convents, homes and other hiding places to bring them to the safety of their own people.

Rabbi Schonfeld had no time to lose because the Communists, especially

the Jewish Communists in power, wanted Polish Jews to remain there to help create a "new Poland." Armed with several hundred cartons of cigarettes—the most valuable post-war currency available—the rabbi chartered a boat in Gdansk and escorted 150 Jewish boys and girls aboard.

Because Rabbi Schonfeld was as concerned with the Jews' spiritual as well as their physical well being, soon after the war he created synagogue-ambulances, also known as mobile synagogues. The appearance of these large trucks provided a much-needed psychological lift to the Jewish DPs (displaced persons). Rabbi Schonfeld and his assistant, Marcus Retter, gave the refugees a friendly welcome and kosher food, which many had not tasted in years.

A spiritual leader, founder of a network of Orthodox day schools and a humanitarian activist par excellence, Rabbi Schonfeld was a most original phenomenon in modern Anglo-Jewry. Totally committed to Torah Judaism, he felt secure within the religious Jewish world and in the British secular world; he worked independent of any political or religious group, and enlisted the help of those who had very different views from his own in order to carry out his rescue missions. Chacham Dr. Solomon Gaon described him as a "savior of the bodies and souls of thousands of Jewish people."

Despite the large-scale planning and myriad administrative details he coordinated, he found time for little personal touches that "his" children—now parents and grandparents living in many parts of the world—remember with gratitude. By word and deed, he convinced his charges, young and old, that they were worthy of love and concern, and that no matter what they suffered at the hands of the Nazis, it was worth their while to persevere physically and spiritually as proud Jews.

Holocaust Hero is an extraordinary story of tragedy, triumph and wonder. A thrilling, compelling book, it demonstrates what one dedicated, daring individual could accomplish despite the opposition of most of the Jewish establishment. Indeed, one with God *is* in the majority. **IA**