

Berkowitz, Laszlo, rabbi *Derecske

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From Auschwitz to Falls Church

By Vivian Yudkin

"... because thou hast struggled thy name shall be called no more Jacob but Israel for that thou hast striven with God and with man and hast prevailed..." Genesis 32:28

Rabbi Laszlo Berkowitz opens the door in his shirtsleeves. He's at home in his fourth floor apartment at Ravenswood Towers in Falls Church, "The Man From La Mancha" is playing on the phonograph, his only child Julie, 4½, is telling excitedly how they will go soon on a plane to her grandparents' house in Cincinnati for Hanukkah. The rabbi's comely, Ohio-born black-haired wife calls her husband "Larry."

At 40, Laszlo Berkowitz, rabbi of the Reform Temple Rodef Shalom (it means Pursuer of Peace, is brimming over with youthful vitality and love of life, a thoroughly alive man. His eyes dart from his comely young wife Judy to his daughter to the tea with lemon to the chocolate cake, to the phonograph ("I made the cabinet; I'm an apprentice cabinet-maker in my spare time"). He speaks in a lightly-accented, rapid voice.

In 1963 he was elected to his first pulpit, Temple Rodef Shalom, a **Plan a Building**

The congregation used to meet in the basement of the Fink Building in Falls Church, outgrew that and moved to quarters at the First Christian Church and, having grown some more, now meets at the Chesterbrook Presbyterian Church in Falls Church. The

members have purchased 7½ acres of congregation which has yet to move into its own synagogue.

land in the MacLean-Falls Church area and, the rabbi said, they hope to be in their own temple some time next year.

"We're very happy here," said Judy Berkowitz. "We hope to be here for the rest of our lives."

"My wife likes roots" the rabbi commented. She comes from roots. Her family goes back three generations in Cincinnati. My own roots are not so tender."

It has been an incredible journey for Laszlo Berkowitz. Born in Derecske, a small town on the plains of Hungary, into an Orthodox Jewish family of five children, his parents had plans for him to enter the Orthodox rabbinate.

"They were going to send me to a very fine seminary in Czechoslovakia."

From the age of 8, he attended shul (synagogue) twice a day, morning and evening, and Saturdays as well. He liked it because Father explained the services and when he grew tired he played with his companions in the yard outside the synagogue.

Pastoral Existence

"It was a pastoral existence" he recalled. "It was an event in our town to visit the city five miles away." Only 115 Jewish families lived in the town of about 15,000 people and there was no "Jewish section."

It was a secure, safe orderly life, where "Father was head of his household" and where good manners counted for much. "I like good man-

ners, Rabbi Berkowitz says. "Good manners are like good wine."

It was a world he was to leave at the age of 16 and never see again.

In the spring of 1944 he went to Budapest to visit an older sister. "I was very naive," he said. "I knew the Nazis had occupied Budapest in March... but I did not know..."

"I don't understand" Judy said.

"How was it possible not to know..." "We didn't know" the rabbi reiterated. "We had a censored press. In Derecske we knew nothing of the death camps. We knew only that the Nazis were not supposed to touch people in the National Capital Area."

Seized on Trolley

He was in a trolley one fine spring morning when Hungarian police halted the car and ordered all Jews to disembark. With ten others, Laszlo was led to an abandoned brick factory "which was used for assembling the Jews."

"I was put on an embarkation train inside of a sealed compartment with 70 others and we traveled for eight days. We did not know... I thought the crematoriums were huge bakeries."

They took away his clothes, shaved his head... and suddenly the rabbi starts laughing. "I can't help it, it was horrible and funny because also in the line were four of my schoolmates. One of them was 'Shpitza'... poor 'Shpitza'; his mother used to have a fit if he went out without his coat. We lost

h: Rabbi's Incredible Journey

him. He was 'selected' the day before Yom Kippin, 1944." The rabbi's voice trails off.

After Rabbi Berkowits had spent five months in Auschwitz the crematoriums stopped "working."

"How naive I was," the rabbi said. "I only learned later what my real purpose in the camp was; it was to wait my turn. Paradoxically, he learned to love life and to understand life during that terrible time.

Found Himself

"My whole existence would be different if I had not been there. I was forced to look into my deepest resources at that age. Nobody knows what he really is until he is forced to dig deeper, deeper, deeper."

It was only when he learned of the murder of his parents and his younger brother and sister by the Nazis that Laszlo Berkowits began to hate. "But I never hated the Nazis enough to cripple myself. Years later, when I was traveling with a friend through the Brenner Pass I had the impulse to stop the car and shout at the top of my voice, 'I am here! Laszlo Berkowits the Jewish boy is here! I survived!'"

At the War's end, when the Nazis rounded up men for work camps, Laszlo, then 20, was an auto mechanic. He left Auschwitz by the same path that he had taken on arrival.

"It was snowing," he said. "How beautiful everything was! All of us in the truck on the way to the work camp in Braunschweig were singing as we drove away. We were alive."

Long Day's Work

At the workcamp he rose at 4 each morning, working through until evening, and there he remained until the American troops arrived. "It was unbelievable," he said. "The troops were crying. We were laughing."

It was the first time Laszlo had seen an American. The camp inmates picked up an American and threw him into the air in their exhilaration. "He was a big guy," Laszlo smiled. He remembers that morning vividly: It was May, with the bluest of blue skies, the air crisp, scented from the nearby pine forests. "And I had an unforgettable feeling. Of the greatest victory. To realize you have outlived the war. Now, that is an achievement."

Ill from his experiences, he spent a long time recuperating in an American Army Hospital. He used to entertain the other patients singing from the operas he knows and loves. Music has always been a passion for him. "I have always had music in my house,



By Matthew Lewis—The Washington Post

RABBI LAZLO BERKOWITS
"... We're very happy here"

all kinds. I don't care what it is, jazz, folk, just so it isn't *eingeschmaltzed*.

Music helped him decide on his life's work. "You don't suddenly say I'll be a rabbi," he said. "It rises to the surface, it coalesces. . . . It really happened much later in New York after I heard Bruno Walter conduct the Beethoven Ninth. I came into the street. I wept. I was in a state of total exaltation. It was the turning point for me."

After leaving the hospital he went to Sweden and studied there in Helsingberg—"a lovely city where life was untouched, lived as life should be lived."

He learned English from a Polish teacher who spoke with a German accent. He listened to the BBC and his accent still has the traces of British he absorbed then, although when he reached America his friends kidded him saying, "Enough of that BBC stuff, you can't talk that way here."

He came to America for an education, but although he went to two schools, by day and by night, he was disappointed. "It was too childish," he said abruptly. And then in 1954 he was drafted. He went to Hawaii after two years at Fort Knox and there he sang the *kiddush* (prayer over wine) and assisted the Jewish chaplain.

Now at Pentagon

"Chaplain Samuel Sobel—a real *tzadeck* (a saintly person). He made me a member of his family. He's now at the Pentagon, a captain in the Navy. He married Judy and me."

Laszlo met his wife while studying at the seminary in Cincinnati. She gave him a glance and said, "He's opened up new worlds to me. I never dreamed I'd be a rabbitzen. I was brought up very conventionally, I'd never met anybody like Larry. Whoever knew about the opera in my family?"

The decision to become a Reform rabbi was partially a decision to break with the past; he has never regretted it. He loves his congregation. "It is very intelligent, very civic minded, very devoted to Judaism, is working very hard to create a beautiful congregational community."

He paused. "All rabbis have doubts. We are not like scientists who have proof. But I know that as a rabbi I work to bring Judaism to the Jewish people. That is my job."

He fingered a Hannuka toy of his daughter's, a *dreidel* (a top with Hebrew letters on its sides).

Suffering Destroys

"But I don't advocate suffering as a means of spiritual regeneration. . . . Suffering is not ennobling. It can destroy. All I know is, that I did not become a spiritual cripple because of it."

Then he asked suddenly, "Have you read 'O the Chimneys' by Nelly Sachs? Read it, read it."

The phone rang and Rabbi Berkowits flew to answer it. He returned, with dancing eyes.

"It's a friend of ours. He wants to give us a turkey. I am the only rabbi who gets a Christmas turkey!"