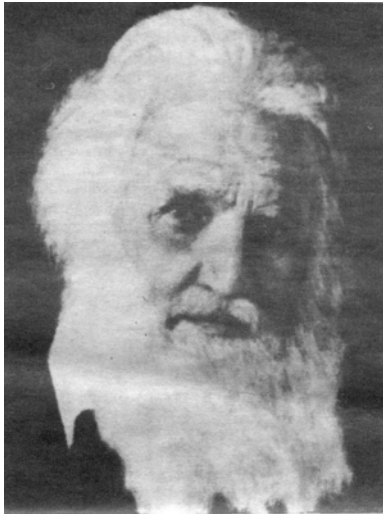**Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky - savior of Jews during World War II**

by Taras Hunczak
(*The Ukrainian Weekly*, January 29,2006)

*"When I call Andrey Sheptytskyi a saint, I am not exaggerating."*
*– Rabbi David Kahane, "Righteous of the Nations of the World" ("Gerechter der Volker der Erde," Die Zeit, December 27, 1985).*

Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky

To understand the humanitarian role of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky during World War II, we have to place it in its historical context. Indeed, the problems facing the charismatic leader of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church challenged his principles and his ability to confront the criminal regimes of both communism and fascism.

The Communists, who espoused a policy of atheism and dictatorship, introduced a system of rule the likes of which the people of western Ukraine never experienced in their life. In the short time of their rule (September 1939 to June 22, 1941) jails were filled with innocent people while thousands were exiled to Siberia.

When the German Army advanced and the Red Army retreated from western Ukraine, the people discovered that jails were filled with corpses of young Ukrainians murdered by the NKVD. The attitude of the Ukrainian people, under the influence of the stereotype "Jew-Communist" or "Judeo-Bolshevism," which was based on a significant Jewish participation in the echelons of the Communist power structure, particularly in the secret police - the Cheka, GPU and NKVD[1] and which was further reinforced by the Nazi policy of anti-Semitism, exploded in some towns and cities into acts of violence against the Jewish people. Thus, a tragedy of the Ukrainian people turned into a tragedy of the Jewish people.

In the city of Lviv, some 20,000 Ukrainians disappeared during Soviet rule and 5,000 were murdered in jails.[2] The relatives of the murdered prisoners, who came to rescue the innocent victims of Communist persecution, discovered only their corpses. In this moment of despair they "... using violence drove together about 1,000 Jews and delivered them to the GPU [really the NKVD] jail occupied by the Wehrmacht."[3] These innocent Jews - the guilty most likely fled with the retreating Soviet army - were forced to carry out of jails the corpses of the victims of Communist persecution, the great majority of whom were Ukrainians.

The Ereignismeldung report further on describes the role played by the Germans in the mass murder of the Jewish people, saying that "the security police drove together and executed about 7,000 Jews as a reprisal for the inhuman atrocities."[4] Similar criminal acts against the Jewish people were perpetrated by the Nazis, often with the participation of some Ukrainians, in other towns of western Ukraine.[5]

This was the tragic reality of the Jewish and the Ukrainian people.

Unfortunately, some writers are not satisfied with the grim, well-documented reality; they add to this tragic story a groundless fabrication for which there is no documentary evidence whatsoever. To such fabrications belongs the tale that there were pogroms, particularly in Lviv, known as "Petliura Days" allegedly "in memory of Petliura to which thousands of Jews fell victim."[6]

As we can see from this short discussion, myth and reality became intertwined, creating a basis for tragedy. The problem was best analyzed by Zvi Gitelman, who stated: "The first is selective historical memory, which ... appears to be the basis of a collective myth that is developed and transmitted across generations. This myth forms the basis for stereotypical images that nationalities develop about themselves and about others. It is not historical fact that shapes peoples' attitudes toward each other, but interpretation of fact[7].."

Metropolitan Sheptytsky, who initially welcomed the victorious German army and thanked them for deliverance from Communist tyranny, was soon shocked by the bloody pogroms and mass executions of the Jewish people. Indeed, as a teacher of morality and civil order, the Metropolitan felt that the prevalent violence and disregard of the principles of civility would undermine the very basis of social ethics.

Describing the situation to Pope Pius XII in 1941 regarding the mass murder of the Jews, Sheptytsky wrote: "It is as if a pack of rabid and raging wolves has thrown itself on these people."

In another letter, addressed to Cardinal Tisserant in 1943, Sheptytsky wrote: "All of Volyn and parts of western Ukraine are overflowing with gangs of a unique political character. Some gangs are Polish, others Ukrainian and still others Communist. Beyond them are the true criminals, among whom are people of various nationalities - Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Poles and Russians."[8]

Sheptytsky was obviously concerned with the absence of all moral principles in the mass executions of the Jewish people in the process of which some members of the Ukrainian militia also participated. In February 1942 the Metropolitan addressed his concern in his letter to SS Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler protesting the Nazi genocide against the Jewish people and the use of Ukrainian auxiliary police in such criminal activity. Himmler responded, advising "the Metropolitan not to interfere in affairs which did not concern him."[9]

The Germans retaliated for Sheptytsky's letter by terminating the activities of the Ukrainian National Council of which Sheptytsky was honorary chairman.[10] That, however, did not deter the metropolitan from pursuing his course of saving lives. "In his pastoral letter 'On Christian Mercy' (June 1942), he linked the Christian duty of fraternal love with the sanctity of human life ..."[11]

A much more powerful statement of Sheptytsky in defense of life, condemning various forms of murder, assassination and the policy of extermination, was made in his pastoral letter "Thou Shalt Not Kill."[12] The epistle, issued in November 1942, was to be read in all the churches, threatening with divine punishment all individuals who "shed innocent blood and make themselves outcasts of human society by disregarding the sanctity of man."[13]

Besides his pastoral letters to his faithful, Metropolitan Sheptytsky decided to use the administrative structure of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church to save as many Jews as possible. One should keep in mind the fact that saving Jews was very dangerous - the penalty for what the Germans called Judenbeguenstigung (favoring Jews) was death by execution. Yet the metropolitan was willing to risk nuns and monks, priests and laymen in order to live by God's rule "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Sheptytsky's closest collaborators in the conspiratorial work of saving the Jews were: the protoihumen of the Studite monks and superior of all Ukrainian monasteries, Klymentii, who was Sheptytskyi's brother; Ihumena Josepha, who was mother superior of all convents; and Father Marko Stek, who provided **false** documents to Jews and organized their escort to the monasteries or convents.

According to Rabbi David Kahane, who was saved by Sheptytsky, more than 240 Ukrainian priests risked their lives hiding or helping Jews.[14] Besides 200 children who were hidden in monasteries and convents, Sheptytsky saved, in his own residence, 15 Jews, among them Kurt Lewin, his brother Isaac Lewin and Rabbi Kahane, who later became the chief rabbi of the Israeli Air Force.

Years later, Philip Friedman would properly refer to these noble individuals, and others like them, as "Their Brothers' Keepers."[15]

For the small group of these fortunate children and grown-ups, the war was over when the German army retreated from Lviv in the summer of 1944. Then the children were placed with Jewish families and Metropolitan Sheptytsky provided food, clothing and blankets for the children and the survivors, who organized a Jewish Committee.[16]

Sheptytsky was, indeed, as stated by Rabbi Kahane, "one of the greatest humanitarians in the history of mankind [and] certainly the best friend the Jews ever had."[17] In an interview with David Mills on May 31, 1968, Kurt Lewin said that seeing a man like Sheptytsky "it's like touching the stars and being inspired by it... It's a ray of humanity at its best, a ray of religion and faith at its strongest."[18]

On the basis of the"evidence provided by the individuals saved by Metropolitan Sheptytsky one must honestly conclude that he was truly one of the Righteous among the Nations of the World.

We should also be aware, however, that there were numerous heroic individuals who were willing to risk their lives to save Jews. Among them we find Mayor Senytsia of Kremenchuk who together with Father Romansky, a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, was able to save Jews by having them baptized in order to be able to provide them with false documents.[19] In Sambir, western Ukraine, Oleksander Kryvoiaza helped save 58 Jews, [20] while in Zavaliv, Roman Biletsky and his lather, Levko, rescued and saved 23 Jews. [21]

These are only three examples of those who were willing to sacrifice their lives to save Jews but, according to Philip Friedman, their number must have been substantial since approximately 100 were executed for concealing or helping Jews.[22]

As reported by the German Security Police, besides these heroic individuals, the members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) provided Jews who were working with the them with illegal passports.[23] We find a similar report in the Ereignismeldung UdSSR. Nr. 183. Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD. Berlin, den. Maerz 1942, which reported that without any doubt the Bandera movement provided Jews with forged documents.[24] Those were, indeed, challenging days.

1. Leonard Schapiro, "The role of the Jews in the Russian Revolutionary Movement," Slavonic and East European Review 40 (December 1961), pp. 164-165. The author wrote that "Jews abounded at the lower levels of the Party machinery - particularly in the Cheka and its successors, the GPU, the OGPU and the NKVD ..." New research in the archives of Russia and Ukraine revealed that Jews in the 1920s and 1930s occupied high positions in the secret service in Ukraine, exceeding in number all the other nationality groups put together. See Taras Hunczak, "Problems of Historiography: History and Its Sources," Harvard Ukrainian Studies. Vol. XXV, Number 1/2, Spring 2001, pp. 129-142.

2. See "Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals," 4:518-21.

3. See Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei and des SD Ereignismeldung UdSSR. Nr. 24, 16 July 1941, p. 12.

4. Ibid.

5. For details see Taras Hunczak, "Ukrainian-Jewish Relations during the Soviet and Nazi Occupations" in Yury Boshyk, ed., "Ukraine During World War II: History and Its Aftermath." Edmonton: 1986, pp. 39-57.

6. See Aharon Weiss, "Jewish-Ukrainian Relations in Western Ukraine During the Holocaust" in Peter J. Potichnyj and Howard Aster, eds., "Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective." Edmonton: 1988, p. 413.

7. Zvi Gitelman, "Contemporary Soviet Jewish Perceptions of Ukrainians: Some Empirical Observations" in Peter J. Potichnyj and Howard Aster, p. 440.

8. Myroslav Marynovych, "Called and Chosen: Several Portraits of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky" in The Ukrainian Quarterly, Volume LX, Number 3-4, pp. 211, 213.

9. Kurt I. Lewin, "Metropolitan Andreas Sheptytsky and the Jewish Community in Galicia" in the Annals of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the U.S., Vol. VII, No. 1, 2 (1959), p. 1661.

10. Kost Pankivskyi, "Roky Nimetskoi Okupatsii." New York: 1965, pp. 29-30.

11. Andrii Kravchuk "Christian Social Ethics in Ukraine," Edmonton: 1997, p. 240.

12. Sheptytsky's pastoral letter "Ne Ubyi" was published in Lvivski Arkhieparkhiialni Vidomosti 55. No. 11 (November 1942), pp. 177-183. A copy of the original translation of the letter into German "Du Sollst Nicht Toeten," probably by the German Security Service, is in my personal archive.

13. Ibid., pp. 222-231.

14. Leo Heiman, 'They Saved Jews: Ukrainian Patriots Defied Nazis" in The Ukrainian Quarterly, Winter 1961, pp. 320-332. Most of the article is the dramatic story of Rabbi David Kahane. Rabbi Kahane tells also about the Jewish children: "We organized 200 Jewish children, including the sons of Rabbi Hamaydess, Rabbi Lewin, and my own daughter. All children were smuggled to one or another monastery, concealed in the crypt, given false certificates of baptism, Ukrainian-sounding names, and dispersed throughout convent schools and orphanages in and around Lviv. All of them survived the Nazi occupation and the war."

15. See Philip Friedman, "Their Brothers' Keepers," Holocaust Library, New York: 1978, pp. 130-136. See also Shimon Redlich "Sheptytsky and the Jews During World War II" in Paul Robert Magocsi, ed., "Morality and Reality: The Life and Times of Andrei Sheptytsky." Edmonton: 1989, pp. 143-162. For other testimonies see "Mytropolyt Andrei," Ukrainskyi Samostiinyk, June 1966, pp. 24-36: also Osyp Kravcheniuk, "Veleten zi Sviatoiurskoi Hory," Yorkton, Saskatchewan: 1963, pp. 97-104.

16. Kurt I. Lewin, "Metropolitan Andreas Sheptytsky ...," op.cit., p. 1666.

17. Heiman, "They Saved Jews," p. 325. To help the Jewish people Sheptytsky appealed even to laymen he knew well. I am referring to the request (July 14, 1941) the metropolitan made to Prof. Ivan T. Rudnytsky, a prominent lawyer in Lviv, to help Samuel Markus. Personal archive of Prof. Leonid Rudnytzky, Philadelphia.

18. The tapes of the interview are in my personal archives.

19. For his subversion of the German policy, Senytsia was executed. See Der Schef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Berlin, den 6. Maerz 1942. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 177, 3. Bundesarchiv, Koblenz R58/221.

20. See Philip Friedman, "Ukrainian-Jewish Relations dur¬ing the Nazi Occupation," YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Studies 12 (1958-1959), p. 289.

21 . For the story of the reunion of Roman Biletsly with survivors in New York, see "Pidhaietski Zhydy v Niu Yorku Viddiachylys Ukraintsevi za Riatunok," Svoboda, February 24, 1978. For another heroic deed see Petro Pik-Piasetsky, "Iak Ukrainsld Lisnyky Riatuvaly Zhydiv," Svoboda, April 9. 1955.

22. Friedman, "Ukrainian-Jewish Relations," p. 288.

23. Taetigkeits - und Lagebericht Nr. 11 der Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in der UdSSR (Bericht vom 1.3.- 31.3.1942), p. 20. "In **Shitomir**, Krementschug und Stalino konte eine Anzahl Banderaanhaenger festgenomen werden, die versucht hatte, die Bevoelkerung fuer eine politische Unabhaengigkeit der Ukraine zu gewinnen. Dabei wurde festgestellt, dass die Banderagruppe ihre Mitlieder und fuer ihre Bewegung arbeitende Juden mit falschen Paessen versah." [In Zhytomyr, Kremenchuk and Stalino we were able to arrest a number of Bandera followers who tried to win over the local population for the independence of Ukraine. At the same time, it was confirmed that the Bandera group provided its followers and Jews who worked for them with false passports.]

24. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 183. p. 189. "Es steht heute einwandfrei-fest, dass die Bandera-Bewegung nicht nur ihre saemtlichen Funktionaere, sondern auch Juden mit falschen Paessen versehen hat." [One can say that undoubtedly the Bandera movement provided not only its functionaries but also Jews with false passports.]

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