

Saul Wahl –the Jewish King of Poland

By William Rabinowitz

“Grandpa, is God king of the Jews or president of the Jews?”

“Chandler, where did you get that idea from?”

“Well, yesterday at Temple Hebrew School, Morah Batya said the Jews chose God.

Did they vote for God?”

When my grandson Chandler was little, he used to come over, regularly. I think he came just to ask me questions. Sometimes, I wondered why he didn't ask his father the left field questions that he asked me innocently. I thought Chandler was so smart then. Sheila thought he was an irritating smart ass and that was why his father wouldn't answer the questions.

Now, when he comes over wearing his burnoose, in our Florida heat and humidity, spouting pro-Palestinian doggerels he learned at college from his lib-left professors, I think he is a smart-ass. Sheila thinks he is a genius. Personally, I think he spouts his mindless mantras so the girls will think him cool. He plans his evening's entertainment on how much \$ he can “charm” out of his grandmother.

There was a show on Jewish T.V. this afternoon. It was about a man some called the “King of the Jews”, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. He was the head of the Judenalteste in the Lodz, Ghetto. The Nazis appointed him the head of the Jewish council of elders. Rumkowski and the Jews ran the Ghetto. Did he save lives or did he save his own skin?

It triggered a long ago memory. Chandler had asked me about the King of the Jews.

“Yes he was, Chandler”, I began. “Let me tell you about King Saul Wahl. He was a Jew. He was elected King of Poland, for one day.

“Grandpa, was there really a King who was a Jew?”

“Of course, Chandler, you remember learning about King David or King Solomon.” I began singing *Dovid – Melech Yisrael, chai, chai ...* a familiar child's song.

“Was King David the first Jewish King grandpa?”

“No, Chandler, he was not the first. The first was Saul.”

“Saul Wahl?” David asked.

“Yes, it was King Saul but not King Saul Wahl.” I responded.

Chandler sat down on the floor in front of me and looked up waiting for the story. Sheila came in, parked herself on the lounge chair with the extra soft yellow flowered pillows next to the lanai and scowled in my direction. I knew that scowl well. Either it was “you are not going to tell that child another tall tale, or it was forget about Friday night Ketubah rights again.”

“Chandler, King Saul was the first king of the Jews”, I continued. “We wanted a king so we could be like all the other people around us. God gave us the land of Israel. It was his to give. He gave us his Torah, he gave us leaders and prophets but we wanted a king like everyone else. We wanted to be “normal.” God said, O.K., if you want to have a King, then you shall have a King. He picked out Saul who became the first king.

Things did not work out very well for the Jewish people when Saul was king. Saul and his son Jonathan died fighting the Philistines. It was David who became King after Saul and his son Solomon after him.

Overall, there were good kings and bad kings for Israel. Having a king between us and God was always hard. Our 12 tribes split up in a civil war, into two kingdoms, each with their own kings. We could not agree who was supposed to be king. The ten northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians who took them away to only God knows were?

When the early explorers came to America – some of them thought the Indians were the ten lost tribes. Heck, Chandler, even into the 19th century some Americans claimed the Indians were Jewish.”

Sheila snorted in the background.

“Grandpa, the Seminole Indians run the Hard Rock, Casino in Hollywood are they Jewish?”

Sheila snorted real loudly.

“No, Chandler there never was any real proof that the American Indians were Jewish.” I looked over to Sheila, and said “You know Chandler, one of the reasons that Christopher Columbus brought a Jew along with him was to act as a translator in case he did discover new lands. Columbus believed that the Jews were everywhere.”

“So who was Saul Wahl, Grandpa?”

“So who was Saul Wahl, Chandler...”

A long, long time ago, in the 16th century, that's almost 500 years ago, Prince Nicholas Radziwill, lived in Poland. He was called the Black Prince because of the many, many bad things he did to people. He did so many bad things that even he felt bad. He wanted to make up for the terrible things he did but did not know how.

Prince Radziwill went to Rome to ask the Pope what could he do to gain forgiveness from God? The Pope told him that he must dismiss all of his many servants who traveled with him. He must

travel the world as a wanderer. He must become a penitent, and journey from town to town for years to make up for his evil ways.

Radziwill did as the Pope told him to do. Life as a wandering beggar, seeking the charitable help of his Christian neighbors, was very hard. One day, he found himself penniless, hungry and cold in Padua. He begged from the Christian townspeople but no one would help him.

Desperate, Radziwill turned to the local Rabbi in the city of Padua for help. Rabbi Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen could not turn away a hungry, needy beggar even if they were Christians. God had created all people, Jews and Christians alike. It was his duty to help. Rabbi Katzenellbogen took in the unknown beggar and fed him. The Rabbi placed him by his fire to warm his bones from the cold. He gave him clean clothes and let him rest.

Over bread that night Radziwill told the Rabbi an incredible story. He told the old Rabbi that he was really a prince who was on a pilgrimage of penitence from a land far to the North. No one believed him and would help him in Padua. He feared he was near death when every door was barred – only the Rabbi opened his door to shelter him.

The Rabbi listened to the story. He could hear something in the voice; something in the way the story was told that said this was no ordinary beggar.

Without a word, the Rabbi got up and went into the back room. He returned with a small sack of gold and gave it to Radziwill. “Here” he said. “Take this and find your way home to your family, to your land.”

Radziwill was astonished. A Jew, a strange Jew in a strange land offered to help him a Christian find his way home.

“Thank you good Rabbi”, Radziwill said. “What can I ever do to repay your kindness,” He asked.

The Rabbi did not ask for his money back. He asked for something much simpler.

From inside the Rabbi’s cloak, in a pocket next to his heart, the Rabbi pulled out a small picture of a young boy. He handed the small picture to the Prince.

My son “Saul” left as a boy for the Yeshivahs in the North. It was many years ago. I have not heard from him since. Though I trust in God that he is well, I am old and would like to know he is safe. Would you take this picture and find him. If he is well, let me know.”

The Prince took the picture and promised that he would. The Prince kept his word to the old Jew. Before he would settle back in his own lands, he searched the Yeshivahs of the North for Saul. He searched and searched until one day, in a great Yeshivah in Lithuania, he found Saul.

Saul had grown to manhood in the Yeshivah. He was a great scholar, learned, honored and respected by his fellow Jews who, like he, were desperately poor. Radziwill recognized that Saul

was very, very poor in money and material items. Saul was extremely rich in abilities, honesty and a nobility of spirit. Radziwill sent word back to Rabbi Katzenellenbogen that his son was well. He told the Rabbi that his son was to serve the Prince as court advisor and counselor at his palace. And so it was.

King Bathori was king of all the people of Poland. He did not have any children to be his heir. That was a very bad thing. Without a future king of Poland factions emerged. Each had their own person they wanted to be king. Each did not want the other's choice. It looked increasingly like Poland would split in two warring camps. Civil war, death, destruction, even invasion and the end of the Polish kingdom were feared if there was no king of Poland. The laws of the lands of Poland demanded that Poland must not go a single day without a king. The king, if there was no heir, would be chosen by a vote of the great Nobility.

King Bathori died in 1586. Civil war between two powerful Polish families threatened the land. The Zamaikis and Zborowskis families each demanded that one of their own be elected king. Neither side could agree. As the sun set on the day of the vote, all knew that in the morning unless a king was chosen, blood would flow in the streets. The two families would slaughter each other over the right to be king. It was not good."

Chandler's eyes widened with the thoughts of Knights mounted on fierce battle chargers plunging head forward with swords outstretched dripping crimson with blood. Only whose blood?

"Chandler, this was not going to be good for anyone, especially the Jews in the middle," I said. "Somehow, someone, probably the loser, was going to make this the Jew's fault."

Sheila squirmed, I ignored her. Her squirming was not going to stop full story mode.

"Chandler, the law was the law. Polish law said that the throne of Poland could not go unoccupied even for a day. If necessary an outsider could be "temporarily" offered the throne until a majority vote could pick the next king.

Prince Radziwill was present at the proceedings. At his side was his widely known and respected advisor Saul. The throne was offered to the Prince. Prince Radziwill could be appointed "Rex pro tempore" – as the Temporary King if he wished.

The Prince declined. He explained, it was not good to appoint him even "Temporary King" as he like the others belonged to one side or the other. It would be a cause of strife. The Prince proposed another in his place.

"I recommend to the good Lords present and all the House of Nobility in Poland a person to be King, even if only temporarily, one that you all know. Everyone present will recognize the candidate I propose for his wisdom, his fairness, his goodness. He is far superior to everyone. He is the perfect candidate for temporary king. He is perfect except for one flaw.

I will decline the honor of being temporary king if you will elect the man I name for the temporary king. It is the right thing to do. It will avoid the spilling of much blood.

Everyone looked about puzzled and perplexed. No one wanted to kill their fellow countrymen in a war of succession if it could be avoided. They agreed to elect as temporary king of Poland the man Radziwill nominated.

“Who was that Grandpa?” Chandler asked.

Prince Radziwill stepped back. From behind his great fur lined coat stood a modestly dressed man in a long black cloak and a skull cap. Radziwill turned and brought Saul forward. Everyone stood in shock. Slowly, it grew, the cry turned into a roar of approval. From hundreds of throats in the great hall one sound rose up – Long Live King Saul. The Nobles of Poland agreed that the Jew, a complete neutral, an outsider, a man known with a sterling reputation amongst them, would be their “Temporary” King.

King Saul was elected and crowned King of Poland that evening. Only the Archbishop stood silent, scowling in the corner.”

“But Grandpa, you said his name was Saul Wahl, Saul Wahl King of the Jews.” Chandler asked.

“Yes I did Chandler. I did say his name was Saul Wahl. That was how he was known by our people. Wahl is a German word. It means election. He was King Saul of Poland, the elected. So we called him Saul Wahl to this day.”

“Saul was king for a day, or maybe for a few days. We don’t know for sure. We do know that during his short reign he passed a number of very good laws. One that was very important to our people and to all peasants in Poland forbids the nobility from killing any inferior person without cause. If a person, Jew or peasant, was murdered by a Noble, the murderer was brought before a court of justice for trial. King Saul was King for a day but he was known as King Saul Wahl the Good, the Jewish king of Poland.”

Chandler sat mesmerized in childhood visions. Sheila sat amused by the story and cynical.

“William,” she began, “a nice child’s story, but how do you know it was true? What Polish history book tells of this Saul Wahl? What kind of crazy name is that anyway – Katznellenbogen? I can’t even spell it.”

It was only Monday, so I was not concerned arguing with Sheila. Friday night Ketuba rights were still a long way off and I would find a way to make up later.

“Sheila, there really is a town called Katznellenbogen. It probably took the citizens twelve years of advanced schooling to learn how to spell that name. There are many famous scholars who have written about Saul Wahl. I can’t say the entire story is true but enough of it is true that it is part of Jewish folklore. Many famous Jews proudly claim their lineage from the Katznellenbogen line.” I said.

“Like who,” she sniffed.

Now I knew I had her.

“Sheila, you like to use makeup, right?” I asked.

“So, does every woman.” She said.

“Did you know that Helena Rubenstein is the 13th great granddaughter of Saul Wahl?” I asked.

Sheila just stared at me.

“O.K. “, I continued, “did you know that Marcel Proust was his 11th great grandson. Karl Marx, Wahl’s 9th great grandson. Moses Mendelssohn his 5th great grandson. Martin Buber his 9th great grandson.” I shot back at her.

“Big deal, anyone can claim anyone.” She said.

“That is all true”, I said staring back at her. “My bearded Hassidic friend, Menachim Mendel Meyer, you know him well enough. Is he a liar or rather would he ever deliberately not tell a truth?” I asked her.

Sheila may not care for Mendel, but she knew better than to call him a liar.

Mendel would never tell a lie.” She said quietly.

“Mendel is coming over this Shabbat for dinner. I want you to ask him something.” I said.

“Menachim Mendel Schneersohn, the great New York Lubavitcher Rebbe is the 15th great grandson of Saul Wahl. Ask him if it is true. If Mendel says it is not so, I will apologize to Chandler. If he says it is true, this Shabbat, you will do everything in your ability to make it the best Shabbat I have had in years.”

Sheila knew that I was not betting peanuts. I smiled at Chandler who had no clue what I was talking about.

William Rabinowitz lives in Boynton Beach with his wife Sheila and their little dog, Norman. Norman is a cock-a-tzu. His breed sounds like a chicken sneezing.

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