

MISHIKAN

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In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen

Nechama Tec

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Reviewed by Gershon Nerel

Oswald Rufeisen, born in 1922 in Poland, is well known in Israel and abroad as "Brother" or "Father" Daniel, the Jewish Catholic Carmelite monk from Stella-Maris in Haifa. His biography could not be better titled. The metaphor of "Lion's Den" indeed reflects best the exciting characteristics of Oswald's life experiences. Surviving the "Den of Lions" in which he found himself did not involve only physical threats, but ideological dangers and spiritual opponents as well. In different places and in changing times he found himself, like Daniel of the Bible, in the eye of the storm, his very existence at risk.

Nechama Tec, in her well-documented research, describes Rufeisen in various situations of real and quasi-"Lions Den" dangers. She presents Rufeisen as succeeding in his battle to survive when:

1. endangered by the German Nazis in occupied Poland during World War II;
2. mocked and accused as a German spy by Soviet Russian partisans in the forests;
3. becoming a "persona non grata" to the Communist authorities in Sovietized Poland;
4. criticizing idolatrous traditions within the Christian Church;
5. condemned by orthodox Jewry and even secular Jewish intelligentsia for his conversion and monastic life.

Although quiet and courteous, Rufeisen is also portrayed as full of revolutionary spirit. He was a strong individualist but never egocentric. On the contrary, while fighting against his enemies, he was at the same time active in support of any helpless person no matter what their background or ethnic origins. Thus, Rufeisen

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consciously exposed himself to a death sentence by initiating the secret evacuation of Jews from the Mir ghetto in Poland, which was destined to be totally liquidated by the Nazis on August 13, 1942.

Alongside the physical dangers that Oswald confronted, the main theme of this biography is Oswald's integration of his basic identity. Living among Poles, Germans and Russians on the one hand, and among Catholic clergymen and Jewish traditionalists on the other hand, he proudly and consistently retained his sense of Jewish identity, manifested whether he dressed in the German S.S. uniform, or the Carmelite robe. Not only did he reject the idea of assimilation, he insisted on the unique personal expressions of his Jewishness.

Rufeisen remained an ardent Zionist "Halutz" (pioneer) "who chooses to live in Israel and identify with it." (p. 3). After becoming a disciple of Jesus, Rufeisen defined himself as a "Catholic Jew," unceasingly emphasizing the continuity between his Jewishness and Catholicism. Eretz-Israel became the natural field for his energetic activities following his immigration in 1959.

However, Rufeisen would never call himself a "Messianic Jew." Such a term would not be universalistic enough for him. Nevertheless, as an Israeli, Oswald says, "If you agree and accept the concept of Hebrew Christians, you must consider the return of the Jews to this country" (p. 243).

Rufeisen's vision is to recreate the original Hebrew Church of the early centuries, restoring a Jewish Christianity which would principally be based "... not on the revealed truths [dogmas, G.N.], but (rooted) in the faith in God" (p. 242). Yet it is hard to grasp what would exactly be the full content of this Hebrew Church that Rufeisen envisions.

For Oswald it is crystal-clear that the resurrection of Jesus prefigured the national restoration of the Jews in Palestine.

In fact, Oswald's diverse activities focus on proving to anyone who will listen, that "early Christianity was Jewish" (p. 241). His goal is directed at "repairing the relationship between Jews and Jesus" (p. 240). His strong sense of commitment in whatever he does, cannot be doubted and Nechama Tec reflects that dedication throughout the book.

Understandably, Tec's biography is full of admiration for Rufeisen's personality and adventurous life, but it is not merely a hymn of praise. In her investigative approach she often compares evidence from different sources. Diverse testimonies are used to corroborate the historical data, with oral and written sources effectively incorporated into the narration. At the same time, myth and reality are also

examined. For example, the “glorious reputation” of the partisans’ activities stands against their “vagabond engagements” (pp.192-194); or the “superlatives” of some of Rufeisen’s deeds, are exposed as “wishful thinking” (p.189).

The author does not hesitate to disagree with some of the views expressed by Rufeisen. When dealing with the theological explanation given by Rufeisen to the *Shoah* (the Holocaust), Rufeisen told her about the analogy he makes between the Holocaust and the Crucifixion — “the *Shoah* being the Golgotha of the Jews.” She responded she has difficulties with this kind of reasoning ... (p. 170). For Oswald, however, it is crystal-clear that the resurrection of Jesus prefigured the national restoration of the Jews in Palestine. “... Isn’t it strange that three years after the Jews were almost totally annihilated, the Jewish nation came into being?” (ibid.); this question, asked by Rufeisen himself, would be just a rhetorical question for him.

Yet this biography is not only a history book, a look into the past, but also a serious contemporary account relating to issues disturbing us today. One may also ask: Is this “vita” of Rufeisen only a “one-person phenomenon,” a totally unique and isolated event in recent Jewish-Christian history? The answer is an absolute “NO!” If we look only at the Israeli scene, we may find at least two other Jewish-Catholic Israeli monks, who also deserve a biographer: The Carmelite “White Friar” Elias (John) Friedman, and the Franciscan “Grey Friar” David-Maria Jaeger. To compare the diverse opinions and activities of these “Latin monastic personalities” in Israel with some other monks as well would be an instructive challenge.

I unhesitatingly recommend this book to anyone who is interested not only in documented history, but in a fascinating and sincere personal story. At the same time, the primary sources used in this book are an important mine of material for professional historians of the Holocaust, Zionism, “Synagoga and Ecclesia” relations and Hebrew Christianity.