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Bryan Mark Rigg. *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 284 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10448-6.

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Mission Impossible

On April 6, 2005, the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission), held a hearing on "The Schneerson Collection and Historical Justice" that centered around efforts by the Chabad Lubavitch community to have the Schneersohn Collection, which consists of a library of religious texts currently housed in the Russian State Library, and a Chabad archives in a Russian military archive, returned to the Chabad Lubavitcher community in the United States. The Russian government considers this collection to be "a national treasure, a part of Russia's cultural heritage." But the man for whom this collection is named, Rebbe Joseph Schneersohn, considered this collection so valuable to the future existence of his movement that he did everything possible to take it with him as he fled Nazi persecution in the early months of World War II. The Rebbe's unsuccessful efforts to save his personal library and the movement's precious religious manuscripts is one of the central topics of the book under review.

The charismatic Chabad Lubavitch movement traces its origins to late eighteenth-century Lubavitch (in present-day Belorussia). As an Hasidic sect, the Chabad Lubavitch movement emphasized the importance of "scholarship and personal transformation," meaning that study of the Torah and the Talmud must be not only an integral part of one's life but also affect it deeply on a very personal level. But, unlike mainstream Jewish sects, Hasidic Jews, particularly the Lubavitchers, felt they had a spiritual mission to bring Jews throughout the world back to their religious and spiritual roots through

Torah study and practice. The Chabad Lubavitchers, like most Hasidim, saw their teachings and their leader, the Rebbe, as inseparable. Many Chabad Lubavitchers saw in their Rebbe a possible messiah, which added to the Rebbe's mystique and influence over the sect. When Rebbe Joseph Schneersohn, successor and son-in-law of Menachen Schneersohn, died in 1994, some of his followers openly proclaimed him the Messiah. This fanatical devotion to the Lubavitcher Rebbe is a key to understanding the dramatic efforts to save this minor, though important, Jewish spiritual leader in the early months of World War II.

Though the Chabad Lubavitch movement has grown into a worldwide movement with 200,000 followers and a budget of \$1 billion today, the sect started as a rather smallish group of devout Jews centered mainly in the Soviet Union. Joseph Schneersohn, who succeeded his father, Shalom Dovber, as Rebbe in 1920, quickly became a martyr to the faith, time and again incurring Soviet wrath for his determined efforts not only to spread the faith but also insure that Jews throughout the Soviet Union had access to the Torah and Talmud. Forced into exile by the Soviets in 1927, the Rebbe moved to Riga, but sent his vast archives and library to Poland for safe keeping. In the 1930s, he moved to Otwock, south of Warsaw, where he found himself trapped after the Germans invaded Poland in Fall 1939.

About a third of this well-written, tightly woven book deals with efforts by Chabad leaders, particularly in the

United States, which provided the Lubavitch movement with the bulk of its financial resources, to spirit the Rebbe, his family, and his small spiritual entourage out of Poland to safety to the United States. It is a remarkable story, given the fact that it was the Germans who took responsibility for finding the Rebbe in war-torn Warsaw and then moving him first from Warsaw to Berlin and then on to Riga. While this was no small feat, it almost pales in comparison to efforts by Chabad leaders to convince American officials of the importance of Rebbe Schneersohn to the Chabad movement. Given the insignificance of the Chabad Lubavitcher movement to mainstream American Judaism, Chabad leaders and their supporters tried to depict Schneersohn as an extremely significant Jewish spiritual leader. One government advocate bought into this idea and called the Rebbe a modern St. Francis of Assisi.

Efforts by the Chabad leadership to acquire permission for the Rebbe and his entourage to enter the United States met with the familiar resistance of immigration and other officials to any special consideration for Jews subject to Nazi persecution in Europe. Rigg, like many other scholars, points to latent anti-Semitism as the reason for such opposition. But because of stubborn, persistent pestering of many high level officials in the Roosevelt administration, the United States finally granted entrance visas to the Rebbe and his small party at the end of 1939.

A more intriguing story centers on German efforts to locate and spirit the Rebbe out of Poland in the last months of 1939. Working through the Abwehr, the German military's counterintelligence unit, a "half Jew," Major Ernst Bloch, in command of a small unit made up partially of Jewish "Mischlinge," began a lengthy search in

Warsaw looking for the Rebbe. For a number of weeks, Bloch found himself part of a cat and mouse game triggered by understandable Jewish distrust of anyone in a German uniform. Fortunately, the Rebbe learned that German soldiers had been dispatched to save him, and by late November 1939, Bloch found the Rebbe and began to lay plans for his escape. After a few stops and starts, it was decided that the best escape route lay through Riga. But even this route was chancy, given the growing Soviet threat in the southeastern Baltic area. Even trickier was the escape route from Warsaw to Riga via Berlin. Bloch sounded almost like Oskar Schindler in Steven Spielberg's film as he verbally muscled his way past SS guards and others who were stunned to see Wehrmacht soldiers escorting the bearded Rebbe and his entourage along this route. Once in Riga, things improved, particularly after the Rebbe learned of American approval of his entrance request.

Rigg devotes the last part of his book to Rebbe Schneersohn's life in the United States, particularly his troubling pronouncements that the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust constituted divine punishment for straying from what he considered the essence of Judaism—Torah study and practice. Though contemporary Chabad leaders have distanced themselves from the Rebbe's thoughts on this particular issue, they remain a shocking reminder of the narrow, isolated thinking of a man driven by fanatical devotion to his particular religious ideas. Sadly, even though he himself was a Holocaust victim, he seemed not to have learned much from his experiences. For Rebbe Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the only truth was that of spiritual enlightenment through study of the holy books of Judaism. That was, for better or for worse, the essence of his world.

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