

This morning I want to invite you into a story. It is a story about a little Jewish girl. But this little Jewish girl needed a Christian name to survive. She could not be Natalie Leya Weinstein, not in Warsaw, Poland under Nazi control in the 1940s. So her father gave her a new name. Natalie Yazinska.

Her mother, Sima, sobbed. "The little one must make it," Leon Weinstein told his wife. "We got no chance. But the little one, she is special. She must survive."

So Natalie's father attached a metal crucifix to a necklace and hung it on their daughter. On the paper, he scrawled another fiction: "I am a war widow, and I have no way of taking care of her. I beg of you good people, please take care of her. In the name of Jesus Christ, he will take care of you for this."

A cold wind cut at the skin that December morning, so Leon Weinstein bundled Natalie, 18 months old, in heavy pants and a thick wool sweater. He headed for a nearby apartment, the home of a lawyer and his wife. The couple did not have a child. Weinstein hoped that they wanted one.

He lay Natalie on their front step. Tears ran down his cheeks. You will make it, he thought. She had blond hair and blue eyes. "They will think you are a Gentile, not one of us, he said to his infant daughter as he left her on the doorstep of these strangers."

Walking away, he could hear her whimper, but forced himself not to look back until he crossed the street. Then he turned and saw a man step out of the apartment. The man read Weinstein's note. He puzzled over the baby. Cradling Natalie in his arms, the man walked half a block to a police station and disappeared inside.

Weinstein was beside himself. What if the Gestapo took her from the police? What if they decided that she was a Jew?

Weinstein lived in the ghetto in Poland. It was surrounded by an 11-foot-high brick wall, barbed wire and guards. More than 400,000 Jews had been forced inside the 3.5-square-mile area. By early 1943, however, an estimated 300,000 of them had been shipped to Treblinka, a death camp in northeast Poland.

Weinstein hid in sewers that swarmed with rats and human waste. He eventually found a way out that seemed safe, but was too weak to lift the iron cover. Was this how he would die? He fell asleep and dreamed of his grandfather, a deeply religious man. "You must keep going," his grandfather told him. "You must. Don't stop."

Weinstein awoke with new energy. He hunched his back against the manhole cover, gathered all of his strength and pushed. It opened. In the early morning darkness, he hunted for someone who would shelter a fleeing Jew who stank of sewage and looked as though he might collapse and die.

A Warsaw couple he had known before the war took him in. Weinstein asked about his relatives who had stayed behind in Radzymin. All were dead. He looked for his wife, Sima. He learned she was dead too. By spring 1945, the war was over, and surviving Jews began to leave the country. Weinstein was not among them. He had to find Natalie.

His first stop was the street where he'd left his little girl. It was mostly rubble, but one building stood untouched — the police station. He walked in. "Do you remember hearing about an abandoned girl who was taken here?" One officer did. The girl had been taken to a nearby convent.

The nuns there remembered, too. The baby was among several they tried to shelter. Disease claimed some, but the baby named Natalie survived. When the fighting drew near, she was sent to a cloister in the countryside. Over bombed-out roads, pedaling hard on his bicycle, Weinstein made his way there. But Natalie was gone, sent to another group of nuns. On he went, to convent after convent, sometimes sleeping in fields.

The story was the same. Natalie had been there, but nobody knew where she was now. Nobody knew if she was alive. After six months, Weinstein returned to the city, exhausted.

Then, against all hope, he decided to visit a convent near the ghetto. He walked past a statue of the Virgin Mary, then into a hall where dozens of pale, thin orphans stood. "Mister, mister." They grabbed at his tall, brown boots. "Mister, mister, take me, take me."

As he drew away, frustrated, a nun walked past, carrying a bony, blond girl, who looked about 4. He looked into the child's eyes. They were blue. This, he said, was Natalie.

"She is yours?" the nun asked. "How can we know?" "If she is," Weinstein said, "then she has a little brown birthmark, the size of a pencil eraser, just near her right hip." The nun lifted the girl's dirty gray shirt and they looked. He had found Natalie.

Weinstein is now 101 and living in Los Angeles, California. He is cared for by a woman who is a psychologist known by her married name. Natalie Gold Lumer, his one and only daughter. When asked what he means to her, Natalie says simply, "To have a father with such courage ...I owe him my life."

This is the time of year when we read about another birth. The one named Jesus. The name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning "God has saved." Through the birth of Jesus, God has saved. But what does that mean?

If you are a nun living in the ghettos of Warsaw, Poland in the 1940s, you interpret "God has saved" to mean that you set up an orphanage with the meager supplies that you have to try to care for a group of children of unknown origin as best you can. And you do this because even though you suffer the agony of seeing many of these children die due to starvation and disease, you believe that God will save someone, somehow in that town and orphanage.

If you believe that "God has saved," and you are a young, poor, teenage pregnant girl living in Palestine 2000 years ago and an angel appears to you, you look out over your meager possessions and you witness the chaos of your life and even though you have nothing but faith to base your belief on you say to God, "here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

And if you believe that "God has saved," and you live today, then you look out at your world and don't despair over what you do or do not have. But instead you look at those who do not have whatever and you give of yourself to help somehow, somehow.

If someone is lonely, you give them companionship. If someone is poor, you give them food to eat. If someone is in prison, you visit them. If someone is scared, you give them comfort. If someone is seeking something of importance, you find a way to provide. If someone is confused, you give them direction. If someone is hungering for God, you begin to share the stories from our faith about a young, pregnant, poor teenage girl giving birth to the son of God and placing him in a feeding trough.

Mary was told that she would bear a son and that she was to name him Jesus meaning, "God has saved." Now we are invited to share through our words and our actions what "God has saved" means for those around us. AMEN.

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-Streeter, Kirk, LATimes, <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2011/aug/05/local/la-me-survivors-20110805>

-Text: Luke 1: 26-38

-Given: December 18, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)