

Immigrant's remembrances embody tragic era

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — If any one family embodies the total tragedy of the Nazi era, that family might be the relatives of Werner Schenk.

Director of Computer Support Services at the University of Rochester's William E. Simon Graduate School of Business Administration, Schenk emigrated to the United States in 1950 from what was formerly called West Germany. Behind him lay a trail of blood-stained tragedy and historic irony giving credence to the old saying, "Truth is stranger than fiction."

Schenk and his son, Kurt, detailed the elder man's life during separate interviews with the *Catholic Courier*.

Werner Schenk was born in Lubeck, Germany, to a Lutheran father and a Jewish mother on April 7, 1933 — the day Nazi Germany passed its first piece of anti-Semitic legislation. According to the 1987 book *The Holocaust* by Leni Yahl, that act was designed to remove

Jews from important civil-service positions.

Considered a "half-Jew" under Nazi law, Werner attributed his ultimate survival from the Holocaust to the low-key, non-religious nature of his mother's Judaism; the prominence of his father, a respected citizen and a supervisor at a valued rifle factory; and the continuing protection of a number of townspeople, including an anti-Nazi Catholic police officer who would warn the Schenks whenever the Gestapo — the Nazi secret police — were planning to round up Jews.

In fact, Schenk was so well assimilated among Lubeck's Gentile population that he actually received an invitation to join the Hitler Youth in 1941.

"So I got a notice to report. It was put in flowery terms, and the meeting was at school. There was this dilemma over what I should do, and it was decided that I just better go," Werner told his son for a 1984 college term paper. "I got there and there was (a Gestapo officer) looking over the recruits. He looked

over the list and spotted my name. He knew the few Jews in the city by name ... He just told me that Jews weren't desired for this so 'Go home.'"

Schenk added that the officer, a "Mr. Duvel," was not typical of Gestapo officers — polite and somewhat lacking in the anti-Semitic zeal that characterized so many of his colleagues.

"He believed in (Nazism) firmly, but he didn't go around searching for Jews to harass," Schenk remembered.

Unfortunately, few of Schenk's Jewish relatives were as lucky as he. Forty to fifty of them were killed in various concentration camps throughout Germany and Poland, he said.

One of his uncles, Isau Schild, was a passenger on the famous St. Louis, the last ship attempting to deliver forcibly exiled Jews to safety. Originally destined for Cuba, it was turned away by nation after nation — including the United States. Even Pope Pius XI's appeal to President Franklin Delano

Roosevelt could not win safe harbor for the St. Louis.

After the ship disembarked in Belgium, Isau Schild and his family lived on the run. Family members eventually were captured and killed in various places, including the Dachau death camp in which Isau Schild perished only weeks before the arrival of U.S. troops.

An ironic footnote in the Schenk saga is the fate of Werner's "third or fourth cousin," Klaus Schenk. Also known as Count Stauffenberg, the cousin was a member of Adolf Hitler's high command and led a conspiracy to assassinate the Fuehrer on July 20, 1944.

Schenk brought a briefcase bomb into a meeting with Hitler and set the timer, Werner recalled. But Hitler survived, and the count was executed for his actions.

The assassination attempt's failure was a cruel twist, Werner Schenk mused.

"That could've saved millions," he said.

Press revives speculation on Vatican, Nazis

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and a number of Catholics as well — have criticized the pontiff for failing to explicitly condemn Nazi outrages against Jews, especially when the ovens were burning at Auschwitz, Dachau and other concentration camps.

"The vast majority of Jews felt that (Pius XII) could have done more," Rabbi Jack Bempored, chairman of New York City's Inter-religious Affairs Committee of the Synagogue Council of America, commented during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

And Rabbi Judea Miller, senior rabbi at Rochester's Temple B'rith Kodesh, went even further in his characterization of Pius' "silence." Rabbi Miller likened it to a "mark of Cain" on the Vatican.

"The church, in a sense, was a collaborator (with the Nazis) in their silence," Rabbi Miller said.

Defenders of Pius XII have long maintained that the pope feared that condemning the Nazis' anti-Jewish measures explicitly would only cause more harm to befall the Jews.

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights published a 1987 book entitled *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, which detailed several defenses by Catholics and Jews of Pius' refusal to explicitly condemn Nazi atrocities.

The book contained a monograph entitled "A Question of Judgment," issued in 1963 by the late Dr. Joseph Lichten, then head of the Intercultural Affairs Department of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

"The history of Vatican intervention in Nazi cruelties to the Jews dates back to April, 1933, when Pope Pius XI (the pope before Pius XII) sent an urgent request to the then new Hitler government to not to let itself be influenced by antisemitic aims," Lichten wrote. "From 1939 onward, the public record shows countless Vatican intercessions on behalf of Jews, both prompted by pleas from Jewish and other sources and owing to the personal initiative of Pius XII."

Lichten, and such other defenders of the pope as Vatican historian Father

Robert Graham, S.J., and English author Anthony Rhodes — who wrote the 1973 book *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators* — note that Pius XII played a touchy diplomatic game with the Nazis, who saw any statement condemning wartime atrocities as an attack on Nazism.

Indeed, Catholics often paid the price for criticizing the Nazis with their very lives, such scholars have noted. They illustrate their contentions with such examples as the mass arrests of Dutch Catholics and Jews following criticism of the Nazis by Holland's Catholic bishops in 1942.

But critics of the Vatican counter that publicly proclaimed German Catholic opposition to Hitler's euthanasia policies brought a halt in 1942 to their official implementation. Leni Yahl, author of the 1987 book *The Holocaust* explained that unofficial euthanasia continued to be practiced thereafter through deception of patients' families by the Nazi medical establishment.

Rabbi Bempored noted that Holocaust expert Saul Friedlander presented what was probably the most balanced assessment of Pius XII's actions at a 1990 conference of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee at Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Noting the Pius XII was ultimately "a diplomat" who prized "extreme caution," Friedlander considered the Pope's silence during the war years as the "application of standard measures in extraordinary circumstances and the persistence of traditional patterns of thought which obscured the perception of a new dimension of evil in history."

Post-war musings on the Vatican's relationship with the Nazis before, during and after World War II have been the subject of controversy for years. That controversy was given fresh life by recent allegations in the Argentinian and Italian press that the Vatican helped smuggle Nazis out of Germany to South America in the years following the Second World War.

Humanitarian and welfare agencies trying to help refugees in post-war Italy were unable to double check the information offered by the thousands



Illustration by Matthew Morgaine

of foreigners seeking travel papers who lined up outside their doors.

A top secret 1947 U.S. State Department study tried to sort out the situation. Named the La Vista Report for its author, Vincent La Vista, it has created controversy since it was declassified in the mid-1980s.

The report listed as Vatican operations 22 ad hoc committees, run mostly by priests, to help different national groups of refugees resettle. These groups, according to La Vista, either knowingly or unknowingly were channels for communist agents and Nazis. But his report did not say they were set up for this purpose.

Prompted by such materials as the La Vista report, the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center asked the Vatican in a Feb. 6, 1992, letter to release its post-war archives. The Wiesenthal center, which specializes in hunting Nazi war criminals, included in its request a list of six "major Nazi war criminals" the center claimed had "fled with Vatican and Red Cross papers."

A Wiesenthal spokesman told the *Catholic Courier* that church officials

told the center that only Vatican files up to 1922 were open for public perusal. In addition, the Vatican noted that it had already released selected major documents from 1939-45.

The availability of Vatican documents aside, the La Vista report — the basis for many claims against the Vatican — itself contains a fundamental error, according to a National Conference of Catholic Bishops official.

The report erroneously describes a number of refugee organizations of the time run by priests as "Vatican agencies" when they were in fact independent operations, according to Eugene Fisher, associate director for Catholic-Jewish relations in the NCCB Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Fisher said he obtained a copy of the U.S. State Department report in 1983 and found that investigator Vincent La Vista had made a false assumption that colored the nature of his narrative.

In an appendix, La Vista had listed the supposed "Vatican" relief agencies, apparently on the naive assumption that anything involving a Catholic priest is a Vatican operation, Fisher said.

"You can't say that it's a Catholic conspiracy," he told the *Catholic Courier* in a phone interview.

Rabbi Bempored said that after exploring Fisher's claims, he is convinced of his argument's validity.

Moreover, continuing controversies over the Vatican's relationship with the Nazis amount to a "tempest in teapot" according to Rabbi Bempored, who credited Pope John Paul II for expanding on the intense Christian-Jewish dialogue spawned by Vatican II.

In particular, Bempored and such Catholics as Fischer pointed to the 1990 Prague conference as a sign of the immense progress made between Vatican and Jewish leaders since Vatican II specifically deplored Christian anti-Semitism.

EDITORS' NOTE — Contains material from Agostino Bono of *Catholic News Service*.