



the BAKERS'S tale

BY *Richard Rabkin*
PHOTOS *benkatanphotography.com*

They could have shut their eyes and minded their own business, as so many people did in 1940s Poland. But when a three-year-old Jewish boy landed on their doorstep, so to speak, the Bulik family — bakers by profession — opened their hearts and gave the child a home. Michael Bulik, proprietor of Canada’s Bulik Bakery, tells the tale.



At 4 a.m. on a Monday morning on the outskirts of Toronto, Canada, Michael Bulik opens the doors of his family business — the Bulik Bakery — and walks straight to the refrigerator where a nondescript plastic container hides his establishment’s most prized possession. It has traveled across continents, and it has lived through wars. It has witnessed both acts of human depravity and triumph. It has also sustained his family for a hundred years. Michael reaches for the container — his family’s unique sourdough starter — and begins the painstaking process of creating sourdough.

Unlike most other breads, sourdough breads don’t use yeast to rise; instead, a bacterial culture called “starter” grows the dough and leavens the bread. This starter can only be produced by a master baker, and in the Bulik family’s case, their starter has been passed down from generation to generation.

But the starter isn’t the only thing that has been passed down in this family. Just as the Buliks’ sourdough contains within it the remnant of previous “generations,”



Michael Bulik (R) said going kosher was their family's closure. With COR's marketing director Richard Rabkin (L), CEO Rabbi Tuvia Basser, and kashrus administrator Rabbi Sholom H. Adler

so too do Michael Bulik and his family retain and cultivate a very different kind of prized possession — a possession that explains why this non-Jewish bakery has a *hechsher* from Canada's largest kosher certifier, COR (Kashruth Council of Canada) — their still ongoing relationship with a Jewish child that their family hid during World War II.

Who was this child, and why did the Buliks risk their lives to save him? To answer these questions we must leave the present bakery behind and travel back to 1940s Poland, where 18-year-old Wanda Bulik is about to encounter a three-year-old boy who is traveling alone on a train and crying.

“Can You Care for this Child?” When World War II broke out in 1939, the Buliks' bakery, which was founded by Ignacy Bulik in 1912, was already a well-known Warsaw institution. Despite the war, the Buliks, along with Warsaw's other non-Jewish residents, could go about their daily routines and even enjoy themselves — as long as they didn't openly rebel against their German

occupiers. The situation was very different for Warsaw's more than 400,000 Jews, who were crammed into an area just over one square mile in size, which became the Warsaw Ghetto.

Ignacy Bulik's 18-year-old daughter Wanda therefore was able to continue with her private dance lessons at a music and language school on 25 Common Street in downtown Warsaw. One morning, during her regular commute from the suburban area where her family lived to her school, Wanda was stopped by the train conductor, who thought she worked for the Red Cross. The conductor pointed to a three-year-old boy who was sitting by himself on the train, crying, and said, “This is the third time I've seen this boy taking the train on this route from Minsk to Warsaw. We need to help him. Why don't you take care of this child?”

In a 2008 interview with Polish magazine *Wysokie Obcasy*, Wanda Bulik recalled that she had a feeling that the little boy was Jewish, but, “I didn't care. He was nicely dressed with a full head of blond hair. I liked him.”



Family patriarch Ignacy Bulik. Wanda won the argument, and Tolek won his heart

But when she took the boy home, her father saw things differently.

The Bulik family opened a package that the boy was carrying with him. It contained some clothes and a note. Wanda had been right. The boy, whose name, according to the note, was Tolek Weinstein, was Jewish. And it was no accident that the boy had been traveling alone on the train. The note ended with an anguished plea from the boy's family: would whoever found the boy please take care of him.

Ignacy, the patriarch of the Bulik family, was terrified. He had personally witnessed the Nazis drag his neighbor into the street and, in broad daylight, execute the man and his entire family. The man's crime: hiding a Jewish child. Ignacy Bulik desperately wanted to avoid a similar fate for his family. But his daughter persisted. As the Gemara explains, one can be “*koneh olamo b'sha'ah achas*” (acquire one's share of the World to Come in just one moment). This was the Bulik family's moment — and Wanda won the argument. Ignacy gave his permission to hide Tolek Weinstein.

Life for the Buliks and their new “son” was at times surprisingly normal. He went to a Polish school and played with the other children in the neighborhood. He went on family trips with the Buliks in the winter, tobogganing in the special winter clothes that Wanda had sewn for him. He was part of the family. He even called Wanda “Mommy.”

Other times, things weren't as normal. The Buliks had a friend named Henrik who was a police officer. Henrik knew their secret, and he would warn the Buliks about any movements of German soldiers in the area. When the danger of discovery seemed imminent, Henrik would take Tolek to stay with another police officer and his wife, who had no children of their own. Such was the effort required to protect one Jewish child, but it was effort well spent. Tolek and his rescuers were never discovered, nor were they ever betrayed.

After the war's end, there was a massive humanitarian relief undertaking that helped young and old alike. Those responsible for assisting Jewish children came to learn that Tolek's story was not unique. There were a number of Jewish children hidden by non-Jewish Polish families. The question was how to find the children and either return them to their parents or find them an adopted Jewish home.

Yeshayahu Drucker, who later became a colonel in the Israeli army, was then a captain in the Polish army's Chief Rabbinate. He made it his personal mission to uncover these Jewish hidden children. He had heard about Tolek and in 1946 he approached the Buliks and asked if they would release him. At first they didn't want to. “We loved Tolek,” Wanda recalled. “He was part of our family.” Even Ignacy Bulik, who hadn't been sure if he wanted to take in Tolek four years earlier, now didn't want to let the boy go.

But Drucker persisted. Then he was contacted by a Jewish couple who had lost their son during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Their family name was Greenberg, but they had received forged papers with the last name Rajscy and therefore were able to live out the war



Tolek Weinstein/Mati Greenberg. The photo on the right was sent to Wanda from France, inscribed “to Mommy”

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outside of the Ghetto by posing as non-Jews. The Rajscys, as they still called themselves, wanted to adopt Tolek. They had been friendly with his biological parents before the war and as a result felt an attachment to the child.

The Buliks agonized over what to do. They knew that if Tolek remained with them, he would likely become a baker. If he went with the Rajscys, he could go to university and have a better life. Their desire for Tolek to have a better life won the day.

“We all cried hysterically as they took him away,” Wanda recalled, adding that Tolek also cried. “He screamed out, ‘Don’t let them take me! I don’t want to go!’”

The Rajscys, who told Tolek that they were his parents, moved to France. They sent the Buliks a postcard with a picture of Tolek and an inscription written in the boy’s hand, which said, “For Mommy.” The Rajscys added their own note, writing that they would be moving to another country. They didn’t specify where. With that, the Bulik family lost touch with Tolek Weinstein. Wanda tried many times to locate him, but the trail went cold. For 49 years.

“You’re Not Going to Believe the News” When their ship neared the shore of Eretz Yisrael in 1947, the Greenbergs/Rajscys were full of hope. After the horrors of the war, they wanted just one thing: a safe harbor where young Mati (aka Tolek) could thrive and grow. He didn’t disappoint them. The European-born survivor forged a new identity in a country of determined fighters, rising through the ranks of the Israeli army and eventually becoming a colonel. He married a woman born in Krakow who also had been hidden by a non-Jewish family. In time Mati and his wife had children of their own – two daughters.

But in the corridor leading from his dark European past to a bright Israeli future, one door remained locked tightly. Mati’s adopted mother passed away when he was a young man. During her last remaining days she revealed to him that the story she and her husband had told him after the war wasn’t true. They were not his real parents. Mati was adopted. The pain and confusion caused by this revelation forced Mati to suppress the story of his childhood, never to be spoken about again.

Or so he thought.

One day, his 12-year-old daughter Noa received a school assignment: write an essay on any topic. Anything. For some reason, Mati’s daughter chose to write about children of the Holocaust. “Of all of the topics, she had to choose this one?” Mati recalled feeling. “I tried to convince her to choose another subject but she was stubborn. So I had no choice. For the very first time, I told my daughter my story.”

Mati assumed that it would end

The Foundation for the Righteous supplements Wanda’s meager pension, and Yad Vashem has added them to the roll of Righteous Among the Nations



Bulik Bakery’s rabbinical coordinator Rabbi Yisroel Meir Gross files his inspection report. Now the hundred-year-old secret starter has a *hechsher*

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“We all cried hysterically as they took him away,” Wanda Bulik recalled, adding that Tolek also cried. “He screamed out, ‘Don’t let them take me! I don’t want to go!’”

there. Instead, his daughter’s essay won top prize and she was invited to read it to an assembly of school principals. “While watching my daughter present her paper, I felt something in my soul stirring. This was the first crack in my wall of silence.”

Later, Mati heard that the Israel Broadcasting Authority was producing a documentary about children of the Holocaust who were looking for information. Mati volunteered to take part in the documentary, something that would have been unthinkable only a few years before.

During the making of the documentary, called *Reshimot Vanda*, Mati was reunited with Yeshayahu Drucker.

“I remember your story well,” Drucker told Mati. “The Buliks were the first family who didn’t want any money. In fact, they refused to take money. The only condition they made was that you couldn’t be sent to an orphanage. They only agreed to a family.” Drucker added, “They really loved you.”

The documentary was broadcast in both Israel and Poland. After it aired Mati received a few phone calls from people in Israel who thought they had useful information, but nothing panned out. Then a letter arrived from Poland, from a woman named Antonina Liro. As he read the letter, something inside of him said, “This is it.” He got on a plane and departed immediately for Warsaw.

The story that Mrs. Liro had to tell could have been the basis for a best-selling suspense novel, but every word of it was true. She had been friends with Mati/Tolek’s biological parents, Cyla and Mieczyslaw Weinstein, Mrs. Liro explained. When the war broke out, Tolek’s parents were forced into the Warsaw Ghetto. Every few days at a designated time Mrs. Liro would come to the wall dividing the Ghetto from the rest of the city and throw food over the wall.

At some point, the Weinstains were able to smuggle their son out of the Ghetto and place him with their former neighbors. But this was only a temporary solution. Therefore, one night in 1943, the Weinstains managed to arrange a clandestine face-to-face visit with Mrs. Liro. Mrs. Weinstein explained that her husband had been badly injured and was dying. Mrs. Weinstein was also unwell. They feared for Tolek’s safety and begged Mrs. Liro to please locate their son and take care of him. She agreed.

Mrs. Liro found Tolek – and not a moment too soon. While the woman of the house had agreed to hide Tolek, her husband was adamantly against the idea. He yelled at his wife for “hiding Jews.” He even threatened to turn her over to the

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“It has to be more than just chance. There must have been a guardian angel looking out for me who said, ‘No matter what happens, this child will live’”



Michael Bulik (C) with the COR staff. “It’s more than just a business relationship”

police — his own wife. Mrs. Liro quickly volunteered to turn young Tolek into the police for him. Instead, of course, she intended to take the boy to a safer hiding place.

Her first plan was to take Tolek to her parents’ house. But when they arrived, she was horrified to see that German soldiers were removing her parents from their home. Panicking, she ran into a nearby forest where she and Tolek were forced to spend the night. The next morning Mrs. Liro took Tolek to the train station.

When she came to this point in her story, she told the grown-up Mati, “I am sorry. I couldn’t keep you. With me, you had no chance to survive. Neither of us did. But I thought if I left you on the train, then maybe someone would have pity on you and take you in.”

Fortunately, the young Antonina Liro was right. Wanda Bulik was able to provide the blond little boy with the refuge that she could not. But even though Mrs. Liro wasn’t able to give little Tolek shelter, she was about to give the adult Mati something else. In that short conversation, Mrs. Liro gave Mati closure, putting to rest the many years of questions about what had happened to his biological parents.

Mrs. Liro was not the only Pole to view the documentary. One of the Bulik sisters had also seen it, and when a photograph of the young Tolek was flashed on the screen she knew at once that this was the same picture as the one on the postcard that Wanda had received from France — the postcard upon which Tolek had inscribed “For Mommy.” She called Wanda immediately.

“She told me, ‘Sit down because you’re not going to believe the news. Tolek is alive. He is living in Israel and he’s looking for you,’” Wanda remembered. “I went straight to the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland and they got in touch with some Israeli officials. That’s how I learned that Tolek was in Warsaw at that very moment!”

Mati rushed over to see Wanda. He presented her with a big bouquet of flowers. “He was so happy to see me,” Wanda recalled. Mati added, “I couldn’t believe it. I was finally able to close the circle.”

The Circle Widens Back in Israel, Mati’s eldest daughter Yael was volunteering at a conference that was hosting a number of foreign dignitaries, including Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski. Yael asked for a photograph with Mr. Kwasniewski. When he asked her why she wanted the picture, she responded cryptically, “It’s a long story, but I think some friends in Poland would enjoy seeing the photograph.”

Something about Yael’s response didn’t sit right with President Kwasniewski. At the farewell banquet he instructed his aides to approach Yael and find out the rest of the story. When President Kwasniewski heard all the details, he wrote the Bulik family immediately, telling them how proud he was of their heroic action.

The Bulik family was later honored by Yad Vashem with the special designation “Righteous Among the Nations.” In addition, a New York-based group called Foundation for the Righteous honored Wanda Bulik and 60 other Poles at a luncheon in Warsaw; the organization voluntarily supplements their meager monthly pensions. The Israeli government has also honored the Bulik family, bestowing upon them honorary Israeli citizenship should they ever wish to move to the Jewish state.

With his story now in the public purview, Mati Greenberg

no longer feels a need to suppress it. Rather, he reflects on it, seeing the hand of Hashem watching over him and protecting him. “There’s no other possibility except that my survival was Divinely predestined. For me to be smuggled out of the Ghetto, for Antonina to rescue me just before I was going to be turned in, for her to evade the police, for me to sit on the train with the conductor allowing me to ride back and forth, for Wanda to board exactly that train at exactly that moment, for her to agree to take me, for her family to allow me to stay, for the police officer to help hide me ... it has to be more than just chance. There must have been a guardian angel looking out for me who said, ‘No matter what happens, this child will live.’”

Mati Greenberg has continued to keep in close contact with the Bulik family. He has visited Poland a number of times, and they have even visited him in Israel. On one of Mati’s visits to Poland, Antonina Lira hosted a get-together in his honor, inviting friends and neighbors. One of them asked him, “So when are you going to come back to the homeland?” Mati replied, “With all of my appreciation for the people of Poland, my only homeland is Israel, the homeland of the Jewish People.”

During another one of these “family reunions,” a chance exchange put the wheels in motion for Canada’s Bulik Bakery to go kosher. One of Ignacy Bulik’s grandsons, Urek, was living in Canada, where Urek and his son Michael were continuing the family profession.

“Tolek said to my father, ‘How about becoming kosher?’ Immediately, it all made sense,” Michael recalled. “In 2000 we became kosher-certified by the COR. It’s been 11 years and we have a great relationship with the COR. But it’s more than just a business relationship, because of the connection that we have with the Jewish People.”

The COR agrees. On a recent inspection visit one of COR’s rabbis was exchanging pictures of his children with Michael Bulik. He confided to Michael that his daughter was sick. She had begun limping inexplicably, and an MRI had revealed a lesion on her leg. They were still waiting for the results of a biopsy. The rabbi admitted to Michael that he and his wife were afraid. Michael Bulik put his hands on the rabbi’s shoulders and said, “Whatever happens, you will be able to deal with it. If Tolek made it, I am sure your daughter will too.”

A few days later the rabbi received the fantastic news that the lesion was benign. His first phone call was to his family. The second one was to Michael Bulik, who is, indeed, now part of the COR family.

“If my great-grandfather Ignacy knew that our breads are kosher-certified, I’m sure it would put a big smile on his face,” Michael Bulik mused. “Just as our family and the bakery have been interconnected for almost a century, the fact that we are today kosher-certified also brings our family’s story full circle.” ●

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