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Jewish Catholic priest shares message of enduring love, faith

By Gabija Steponenaite

"People should always remember that the greatest problems could be overcome only through dialog. War brings death and deepens hatred. We all have to try to be a little bit kinder, and the world will be a better place for all of us."

—Fr. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel, theologian and professor

Fr. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel, a Catholic priest who learned in middle age that his parents had been Jewish, has made it his mission to improve Catholic-Jewish relations in his Polish homeland and throughout the world. Now a theologian and professor at the Catholic University in Lublin, Poland, Fr. Weksler-Waszkinel came to Chicago recently to share his unique life story and reflect on his mission.

He spoke at the Chicago Cultural Center during an event organized by the two committees of the Chicago Sister Cities International Program in Warsaw, Poland, and Petach Tikva, Israel.

Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel's life began during the time when two authoritarian regimes, Communism and Nazism, were separating families, turning neighbors into enemies, and isolating countries. He was born in 1943, in the ghetto of the little town of Stare Swieciany near the capital of Lithuania.

The exact date of his birth is unknown: he never spoke to his birth parents, and the couple who raised him tried to forget any detail relating him to his family. Little did he know that he had fulfilled his birth mother's prophecy when he was ordained into the priesthood in 1966. The greatest secret of his life was revealed only when he was 35 years old: he was a Jew, saved and raised by a Polish family.

Fr. Weksler-Waszkinel remembers that as a child he felt confused when strangers asked him the question, "Whom do you really resemble, your father or your mother?"

"I was completely unable to deal with such questions be-

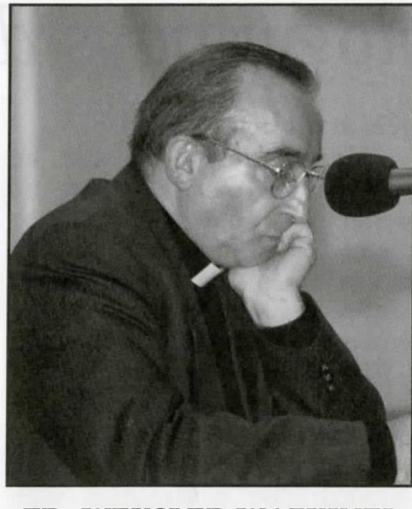
cause I resembled neither Father nor Mother," he wrote in his biographical essay published in the book *The Last Eyewitnesses: Children of the Holocaust Speak*. "They were auburn-haired with typical Slavic faces; I had thick jet-black hair and a totally different face."

His adoptive Polish family of Piotr and Emilia Waszkinel raised him. His father was a driver and a welder and his mother took care of their modest household and little daughter Janina along with Romuald. By the end of World War II the family had had to move several times until it settled in Paslek, a little town in Poland.

Weksler-Waszkinel was four or five years old when he heard the word "Jew" for the first time. He wrote, "I was returning to my house when two drunken men shouted at me, 'Jew, Jew, a Jewish bastard!' I had no doubt that they were calling me names. I ran away to my mother, frightened, and I tried to explain to her what had happened. I did not understand at all what 'Jew' meant."

"I did not want to be a Jew," he admitted. "I was scared to be a Jew."

This attitude was a result not only of his wish to look like his peers, but of religious teaching that Jewish people were respon-



FR. WEKSLER-WAZKINEL

sible for the death of Jesus. "I loved and still love Jesus," he said.

His parents seemed to avoid any questions related to his past; when they did talk, explanations seemed to be more confusing. Every time he read about Jewish people to his mother, tears in her eyes made him wonder "Why?"

One day, when Weksler-Waszkinel was seventeen years old, he walked into his house and told his parents about his decision to become a priest. Piotr and Emilia could hardly believe that he was serious. They could imagine him in any vocation, even an artist, but not a priest. Every Sunday at church

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Jewish Catholic priest shares story

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the boy devotedly prayed between his father and mother. His parents' disapproval came as a great surprise, but it also strengthened his determination. "Since my childhood I dreamt of being a priest," he said.

In 1960 he joined other students in the Higher Ecclesiastical Seminary in Olsztyn, Poland. Within a week of beginning the new school year, his father succumbed to a heart attack. This tragedy evoked hesitations and guilt in the young man's mind; the thought that his father disapproved of his choice was especially painful. According to Weksler-Waszkinel, "Father was afraid that I would not be able to manage. I must be a good priest!"

He continued his studies, and after the graduation he worked at the Department of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin. The issue of his identity and nationality always was present as a shadow. Remarks and gossip always brought him back to the main question, "Who am I?"

The most memorable day of his life was Feb. 23, 1978. That evening he and his mother were talking about the town of Stare Swieciany and genocide against the Jewish people. This was the evening when Weksler-Waszkinel heard the long suspected and awaited truth. "You had wonderful and wise parents," said his mother. "They loved you very much. They were Jews. I just tried to save you."

During World War II the Nazis had developed a plan called the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe"—complete extinction of the Jews. There were approximately six million Jewish people killed during World War II, three million of them in Poland alone, which had the largest Jewish population in Eastern Europe in 1939.

Instant death was the punishment for those who tried to help a Jewish person. Emilia Waszkinel tried to forget every detail relating Romuald to his birth parents, for she was afraid to be betrayed by neighbors or confess the truth under torture. "Your name was not important; your life was," she explained to him on that life-changing day in 1978.

She also revealed to him the conversation with his mother that turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. One day Emilia went to the Stary Swieciany ghetto and Weksler-Waszkinel's birth mother told her, "You believe in Jesus. He was a Jew."

Please, save my child. When he will grow up he will be a priest."

"I believed that I was in control of my life, but it turned out to be different," Weksler-Waszkinel said. When he learned of his Jewish parentage he did not tell the story to anyone, but wrote a letter to Pope John Paul II to share his secret.

He received a supportive letter back, addressed to "My Beloved Brother."

After that, it took more than a decade to gather his birth family's history. In 1992 he traveled to Israel, where he met survivors from Stare Swieciany. The moment he stepped out of the plane an elderly man came up to him and embraced him.

"You walk just like your father," said his uncle, Cwi Weksler.

Weksler-Waszkinel found out he was a son of Jakub and Batia Weksler. The family owned a nice tailor shop and had an older son Samuel. The Nazis murdered them all.

Weksler-Waszkinel's name itself is a symbol of the tragic and complicated history of two families. "I carry within myself the love of my parents, both Jewish and Polish," he said. "All great words given to me honor both my families' love and heroism; and as a believer only I could say that love is always stronger than hatred."

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According to Lauren Brown of the Campus Park Coalition, "It is premature to conclude that the developer will succeed in erecting a building that the community so vehemently opposes. At more than 350 feet, the proposed building will loom like a monster over Printers Row and the South Loop. This is so out of place with the surrounding structures that it is hard to imagine that the City will approve the zoning variances sought by the developer, or that the community will endorse this project."

Concord allegedly has filed a zoning application to build a 32-story building at 518 S. State St.; the City has not approved the plan, which includes a park at the northwest corner of State and Harrison Streets. No timetable has been established.

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