

## Handout 5b: The Rufeisen Case

Oswald Rufeisen (1922-1998) was born in Poland to Jewish parents who raised him as a Jew. As a youth, he was active in the Zionist Youth Movement “Akiva” and after completing his secondary school studies in 1939, he underwent two years of training in pioneering in Vilna in order to prepare for eventual immigration to Israel.

When war between Germany and the USSR broke out in June 1941, Oswald was caught by the Gestapo and imprisoned. He managed to escape and obtained a certificate that identified him as a German Christian. This certificate helped him become a secretary and interpreter at the German police station at Mir, the district capital. There, he established contact with the Jews of nearby neighborhoods and informed them of German designs and plans of action against the Jews. When he learned that the Germans were about to liquidate the Jewish ghetto, he reported this to the local Jews and supplied them with weapons. Acting on this information, many Jews escaped to the forests. Some 150 of them managed to survive and joined the ranks of the underground partisans fighting the Germans. Most of these survivors eventually made their way to Israel after the war.

- 1) *How would you characterize Oswald Rufeisen’s life up until this point? Were his actions heroic or simply practical?*

When someone disclosed to the Germans Oswald’s activities, his superiors questioned him. During this interrogation, he confessed that he was helping the Jews because he himself was a Jew. He was imprisoned but managed to escape and found refuge in a convent where he hid for the rest of the war. At one point, he joined the partisans in the forests, but they suspected him of being a German spy and condemned him to death. He was saved when one of the Jews he had helped save earlier appeared and testified to Oswald’s true identity.

- 2) *What appears to keep happening to Oswald? What does it reveal about him?*

During Oswald’s stay in the convent, he embraced Christianity and when the war ended in 1945, he became a priest and joined the Order of the Carmelites, knowing that his eventual dream was to join the chapter of the order located in Israel. For the next ten years, he sought permission from his superiors to go to Israel and only in 1958 was such permission granted to him. He applied to the Polish authorities for permission to travel to Israel in order to remain there permanently. In his application, he wrote:

“I base this application on the ground of my belonging to the Jewish people, which I have continued to do although I embraced the Catholic faith in 1942.... I chose an Order which has a Chapter in Israel, having regard to the fact that I would receive the leave of my superiors to travel to the land for which I have yearned since my childhood when I was a member of a Zionist Youth Organization. My national allegiance is known to the Church.”

The Polish authorities agreed to comply only after Oswald had waived his Polish citizenship. They issued him a travel document only issued to Jews permanently leaving Poland for Israel. When he left Poland, he had renounced his Polish nationality, permanently severing his ties. He was, briefly, a man with no nationality.

3) *Why did Oswald (who eventually became known as Brother Daniel) feel entitled to live in Israel? How strongly did he believe in this?*

Upon arrival in Israel, he applied for an immigration card based on the Law of Return. He was refused based on the fact that he was a Roman Catholic monk. He appealed the decision to the Israeli High Court.

### **Homework:**

ROLE PLAY: If you were sitting on the Israeli High Court, would you agree or disagree with the decision to deny Brother Daniel the right to immigrate and become a citizen of Israel based on the Law of Return? Come up with at least three arguments in support of your decision that go beyond the information listed here and really highlight your thinking on this issue.