

Holocaust survivor represents Israel at Pope John Paul's beatification

ROME - In an unusual move, the Israeli government sent an official delegate to the beatification of Pope John Paul II, choosing a government official who survived the Holocaust because he was entrusted to a Catholic family.

Yossi Peled told reporters April 29, "Pope John Paul II is not just another pope for us," but was responsible for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel and for promoting better relations between Catholics and Jews.

Mordechay Lewy, the Israeli ambassador to the Vatican, said that because the beatification is a religious ceremony and an internal matter of the Catholic Church, he did not expect rabbis to lead Jewish religious delegations at the Mass.

Peled, 70, told reporters that his parents, who were Polish Jews, went to Belgium thinking they and their family would be safe. Peled was born in Belgium and he said that when he was 6 months old, his parents became aware of the danger facing the Jews, so they entrusted their infant son to a Catholic family.

"I grew up as a happy Christian boy," he said.

His parents, aunts and uncles all were taken to Auschwitz, he said, and only his mother survived.

Peled said he had not known he was Jewish until his mother returned to claim him when he was 8 years old.

She had been part of Dr. Josef Mengele's Block 10 medical experiment laboratory, Peled said. Because of her physical condition, she could not take care of her son, so she put him in a Jewish orphanage in Belgium. He and 300 other children moved together to Israel a year later.

Peled told reporters he had no idea whether his Catholic foster family had him baptized, but “I used to go to church every Sunday. And I knew that before I go to bed, I have to cross myself. And I knew when I sat down at the table, we have to cross the bread.”

“Suddenly, all of this was forbidden” once his mother reclaimed him, he said. Learning he was Jewish and being told he mustn’t pray as a Christian anymore was difficult for a boy of 8 years, he said.

“Every day I was waiting for dark and sitting in my bed, (so) I could pray to Jesus,” he said.

Peled said Pope John Paul grew up in Poland in “the midst of an atmosphere of publicly sanctioned anti-Semitism,” and yet managed to forge friendships with Jews and establish a new relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

“His apology for the suffering of the Jewish people was nothing short of heroic,” he said.

“Indeed, there is probably no man more fitting to represent the true spirit of Christianity than Karol Jozef Wojtyla,” Peled said.

Rabbi Jack Bemporad, director of the New Jersey-based Center for Interreligious Understanding and a professor at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, told the Vatican newspaper that “the Jewish people have the highest opinion of and the highest respect for John Paul II.”

“He was the first pope to enter a synagogue and to ask for forgiveness for past acts of anti-Judaism, using the Hebrew word ‘teshuvah,’ which means not only asking for pardon, but also the determination to move in a new direction,” the rabbi said.

In addition to establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, “everywhere he went in the world, he always met with the local Jewish community to establish ties of friendship and mutual understanding,” Rabbi Bemporad said. “No pope before him had ever done so much.”