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'Herman Graebe was a righteous person.'

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Abstract (summary)

He recalled his own friendship with [Herman Graebe]. It began when [Harold M. Schulweis], then a rabbi in Oakland, founded the Institute for Righteous Acts to shine "a little light to see the depth of a darkness," as he put it. The institute studies and... [Show all](#)

Full Text

Shortly after the service began at Valley Beth Shalom on Friday night, the main sanctuary of the synagogue among the high-rises on Ventura Boulevard was full. To make room for the people who kept arriving, ushers folded back the giant wooden planks that formed the back wall of the sanctuary, opening up a back room filled with metal chairs.

The congregation had come to pay its respects to a "righteous Gentile."

The evening was meant as a tribute to Herman Graebe, a German Christian who risked his life and sacrificed a fortune of \$200,000 during World War II to rescue Jews from their Nazi captors.

The event turned out to be a memorial. Graebe, who was 85, died April 18 at his home in San Francisco.

A young Christian minister who has just completed a biography of Graebe came in his place to bring news of the hero's final days.

Because Friday was a regular service as well as a memorial, it began with prayers, singing and an aufruf.

The aufruf is a blessing of couples who are about to be married. It is followed by a public rejoicing that symbolically embraces the entire congregation with their personal joy.

"We are doubly blessed this evening," Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis said. "We have two brides and two grooms."

The couples walked up massive stairs to the bema.

They formed a circle with the rabbi, Cantor Herschel Fox, officers of the congregation and a young woman in a blue dress who was reciting prayers that night as part of her bat mitzvah.

Joyous music played and they all danced together for a minute or two.

Rabbi Schulweis eulogized Graebe briefly.

He recalled his own friendship with Graebe. It began when Schulweis, then a rabbi in Oakland, founded the Institute for Righteous Acts to shine "a little light to see the depth of a darkness," as he put it. The institute studies and publicizes the assistance rendered by some Christians to Jews during the Holocaust. Graebe was one of those Christians.

From 1942 to VE Day, he used his training as an engineer, and his dramatic chutzpah, to commandeer Nazi trains and send them, with Jews aboard, to destinations that offered refuge or escape.

Graebe is believed to be the only German to testify at Nuremberg about the atrocities of his countrymen.

Schulweis read a passage from his biography, "Moses of the Rovno," giving Graebe's verbatim testimony from the Nuremberg war crimes trial.

In it, Graebe recounted seeing Jewish families forced to undress and line up, without protest or whimper, at the edge of their mass grave. "Herman Graebe was a righteous person," Schulweis said. "May there be many more like him."

Then Rev. Douglas K. Huneke, pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Tiburon, Calif., went to the lectern.

He spoke slowly, with emotion.

"Herman Graebe longed to be here tonight in this sanctuary with you," he began. "It was all that sustained him a month ago after his 20th heart attack."

Huneke said Graebe confided in him that the congregation of Valley Beth Shalom had helped him erase the nightmarish images of the Holocaust.

By the historical account, Graebe should have needed no such solace.

And yet, Huneke said, Graebe was tormented throughout his life by pictures of the past.

"Graebe saw more than anyone should have seen," Huneke said.

Huneke said he also experienced that torment as a Christian minister upon pursuing studies of the Holocaust.

He recalled his first visit to Auschwitz in 1976, when he was startled by the sight of a face staring at him through a window.

"It was my own reflection, my haunting reflection," Huneke said.

"Then-in 1941-on which side of the glass would I have stood?" he asked. "Who would I have been, executioner, resister or victim?"

Huneke met Graebe in 1980 and was drawn to him as one who had resisted. But he found in Graebe a victim also.

"We can close our eyes and look away," Huneke said. "He could not. Graebe was an eyewitness. What he saw would not leave his mind.

"You received him with great compassion and, in the way you received him, you relieved his great anguish that he experienced in the Ukraine," Huneke said. "He found in this congregation an understanding and an empathy that somehow tempered the nightmares and the images that would not go away.

"Shabbat Shalom."

Schulweis told the congregation that Graebe's wife, injured in a mugging a few years ago, now lives in the Jewish Home for the Aged in San Francisco.

"That is a small measure of poetic justice, that someone who sheltered our people, in her old age has been sheltered by us," Schulweis said.

Schulweis then announced that members of the congregation were forming a new organization to assist righteous Gentiles who are now aged, infirm and poor. He asked everyone to help.

"It is a mandate, a mitzvah, an imperative, and therefore it will be successful," Schulweis said.

More prayers were read. Then the ushers pushed back another wall of wood panels, opening a third room where there was a wooden dance floor.

Joyous music played and the congregation danced.

Indexing (details)

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