

JESUS LIGHTS  
THE CANDLES

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## JESUS LIGHTS THE CANDLES

When Meyer Salzman was five years old, his parents told him that henceforth his name would be Michel LeBlanc, and that he would be Catholic, not Jewish.

"And you must never speak Yiddish, never, never, never again," said his mother. "Promise me!"

"I promise," Meyer said in Yiddish.

"In French! In French!" his mother insisted.

"I promise," Michel said in French.

"And what's your name?"

"Michel."

"Michel who?"

"Michel LeBlanc."

"And what religion are you?"

"Catholic."

"And you were born in Gordes. Where were you born?"

"I was born in Gordes."

They were standing at the entrance to the Catholic orphanage of St. Joseph the Protector, he and his father and mother. A borrowed car idled by the side of the road.

"Again, where were you born?"

"I was born in Gordes!" Michel almost shouted, desperate now, tears in his voice.

His father crouched next to him and took him

in his arms.

"And your father and mother. You don't know them. You never saw them. Say it!"

"I don't know my father and mother!" Michel shouted. "I never saw them!"

"Goodbye, my sweet, my dearest boy," his father said, hugging him and kissing him on the cheek. "Be strong."

His mother kissed him, too, and then his parents got into the car and drove away, leaving him by the locked, massive wooden door.

He pulled the bell chain and heard it sound within. He waited.

"My name is Michel LeBlanc," he recited to himself in French. "I'm Catholic. I never knew my father and mother. I was born in Gordes."

The door opened.

"And who is this?" a priest asked, coming out of the gate and crouching down to Michel's height. "Whom do we have here?"

"My name is Michel LeBlanc!" Michel proclaimed. "I'm Catholic! I never knew my father and mother! I was born in Gordes!"

Years later, when with his American wife and three children he revisited the place where he had stood in front of the orphanage gate, Meyer Salzman wept for the five-year-old boy who had been abandoned there in order to save his life. And he wept for his parents, who had been forced to leave him there, and whose names had surfaced on a list of those to be transported to the east, only to disappear again,

perhaps into the smokestacks of Birkenau.

But then, as he was led into a large courtyard surrounded by low, two-story buildings, at the far end of which was a chapel with a tall bell tower, Michel was too bewildered to weep.

The priest walked him across to the chapel, where about 50 boys of all ages were at prayer. They knelt on the hard stone floor facing a crucifix that dominated the altar. On the crucifix a nearly naked man hung from nails driven into his hands and crossed feet. On his head was a crown of thorns. He seemed to be in agony.

Michel looked questioningly at the priest.

"Do as the others do," the priest said kindly.

"Copy them exactly. You'll learn soon enough."

So Michel joined the boys on their knees, one hand clasping the other, eyes on the crucifix, though he couldn't follow what they were saying, which was not in French. He looked at the man on the cross, wondered who he was, what had happened to him, why now such a large statue of him was hung over the altar, why all the boys seemed to be praying to him.

When the boys were finished, they moved their hands rapidly across their chests in a way Michel could not imitate. Then they got up.

"Jew!" the boy next to him whispered vehemently to Michel as the priest at the altar began to speak. "Don't you even know how to cross yourself?"

Michel reddened and stared at the floor. Then he began to cry to himself, inside, smothering the tears

that sprang to his eyes.

As the priest continued to speak, Meyer imagined his home in Paris, a small apartment near the Place des Vosges, where he slept in the living room. In the early morning the sun came through the windows facing the Rue Saint-Antoine, and he could hear the sounds of deliveries being made to the kosher butcher four flights below.

Each morning he would peer out the window at the busy street until his parents awakened, and his mother came into the living room and kissed him as his father went downstairs to buy fresh bread and the morning newspaper.

Michel became aware of the boys stirring around him. He got up with them. As they left the chapel they turned, bent at the right knee while mumbling, and crossed themselves. Michel tried to do as they did, mumbling nonsense syllables, and emerged with them into the sunny courtyard to begin his new life.

The next day Michel was taken out of afternoon prayers to meet Father Landau, a large, rather rotund elderly priest who was busy at his desk in a luxuriously furnished room as Michel was ushered in.

"Wait! Just wait!" Father Landau called out to Michel, who was waiting anyway.

The priest who had brought him bowed and left, closing the heavy oak door behind him.

While he was waiting, Michel had the opportunity again to examine a crucifix, this time one

behind and above Father Landau's desk. On this crucifix the exquisitely carved face of Jesus (Michel had by this time learned his name) was not in agony but serene, so serene that Michel could not stop staring at him, imagining that despite the nails in his hands and through his crossed feet, despite the wound in his side and the crown of thorns on his head, no state of being could be more beautiful.

"You're Jewish!" Father Landau suddenly accused him, breaking into the rapt loveliness of his thoughts.

A shudder ran through Michel, and he began to recite his litany.

"No, sir. I am Catholic. My name is Michel LeBlanc. I was born in Gordes. I never knew my parents."

"Drop your pants!" Father Landau ordered. "Go ahead. Don't be afraid. Drop them."

Michel dropped his pants. Father Landau got on his knees in front of him and pulled down his underpants.

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "You're circumcised. That means you're Jewish. They'll take you away for that!"

Michel shuddered again and began to cry.

"Now don't worry," Father Landau said hurriedly. "I'll protect you. But you must try very, very hard not to let anyone else see this. Ever. Do you understand?"

Michel nodded through his tears.

"If anyone sees this they'll take you away and

kill you," he repeated. "Here. Put your hand here."

He took Michel's hand and put it between his legs and began to move his hips back and forth, back and forth, until suddenly he stopped.

"Now," he said. "Come on! Lean against the desk! Now!"

Michel, his pants and underpants still around his ankles, leaned on the desk as Father Landau came around behind him.

And then something very strange happened. Jesus Christ came down from the cross, a real, life-sized man, and took Meyer Salzman in his arms. He held him while the priest was busy behind him, held him and kissed him as his father would have, until Father Landau was finished and Christ receded back up onto the cross.

"Now go back to the others," Father Landau said, sitting back down at his desk and resuming his interest in the papers in front of him. "Remember: Don't show yourself to anyone. I will protect you and keep you alive, but you have to help me. Do you understand?"

Michel nodded.

"Now go!"

Michel joined the others in the middle of a French lesson, but he heard almost nothing. All he could remember was the beauty of being held by Jesus Christ. Above the teacher was another crucifix, this one so small and far away, and of such dark wood, that Michel could barely make out the figure on it. But he knew who was there and could still feel the



rapture of being held in his arms.

As the days passed, there were more interviews with Father Landau, and at each one Michel became Meyer as Christ came down to hold him through his ordeal. It became a trick for Michel to become Meyer, and a very successful one.

Even in the chapel at prayer, though on his knees before Christ, Meyer would imagine himself at home on Shabbat with his parents. His father would bless him, stretching out his hands to cover Meyer's head after his mother had lit the candles. And then they would say grace in Hebrew as Michel mumbled his nonsense syllables in the chapel.

But the strange thing was that Christ joined them for Shabbat dinner, sitting at the table to make a little family of four rather than of three. Michel would go through this fantasy three times a day, and each time Christ was there in the same place, singing grace with the rest of the family and holding hands around the table, as though Meyer had brought home a new friend whom the family had accepted as one of their own.

Days and months passed. Summer turned to autumn and then winter. Michel had by now caught up to the rest of the boys his age in both his religious and academic studies. He could recite the necessary prayers in Latin, spoke French in the Provencal dialect, and had begun to learn to read and add and subtract. His interviews with Father Landau became fewer and fewer. Aside from the need to shower and go to the bathroom with unusual modesty, outwardly he had

become like the orphans around him.

Inwardly, Meyer led a different life entirely. He lived at home with his parents in Paris, spoke Yiddish, and practiced what little remnants of Judaism he had been able to understand before his parents had left him at the gates of St. Joseph the Protector.

At least once a day he enjoyed Shabbat dinner with Jesus and his parents. Since he didn't know the proper dates for the Jewish holidays, to round out his days he repeatedly enjoyed apples and honey for Rosh HaShana, fasted on Yom Kippur, took his meals in a sukkah on Sukkot, and so on. And always Christ was with him and his parents, a valued friend and guest, celebrating with them the Jewish sabbath and the holidays.

With the cold weather came thoughts about Hanukkah. Since he didn't know the proper day on which to begin this, his favorite holiday, he saved it for a propitious time.

One Tuesday evening after the first heavy snow, the boys were as usual in chapel. The priest was giving his usual sermon about the hell that was reserved for those who did not believe in the divinity of Christ when Christ, Meyer Salzman told his wife and three children, "came over to me and said, 'Meyer, it's time. Let's go light the Hanukkah candles.'"

"So," Meyer continued, "we went over to the menorah on the kitchen table of my family's apartment. My mother and father were waiting in the kitchen, all dressed up, my poor mother in her best jewelry, the few pieces she could take from Berlin, my

father in his starched white shirt and collar, jacket and tie.

"Usually, Jesus was a guest. But this time for some reason he was the master of the ceremony. He put on our yarmulkes (my father was already wearing his Homburg hat, my mother her lace shawl) and struck a match, lit the Shamos, and sang the first blessing. He had a lovely voice, a rich baritone, and his singing was the most beautiful I had ever heard.

"Then he lifted the Shamos up higher and sang the second blessing, all from memory (unlike my father, who had to have the prayers written out in front of him), and it struck me that he shouldn't know the words because I didn't know them, but he went on.

"As he lit the candle for the first night of Hanukkah, he sang the third blessing, ending in a practiced flourish with the smile of someone very pleased with what he has just done.

"After he placed the Shamos back onto the menorah, he hugged me and kissed me and said, 'Meyer, this is goodbye. Be a good Jew always. Make your parents proud.'

"And I was back in the chapel. The priest was finishing his sermon. I looked at Christ in his agony on the cross, and I wept inwardly that he was back up there suffering. I wept for losing him as a friend, and for losing the rich inner life that had sustained me up to then until I was strong enough, even at that age, to bear it on my own. I wept and wept, I didn't know why, but when I was finished with weeping I was finished with it altogether, and in my hard little heart

was ready to survive."

Now Meyer Salzman was weeping, and he took his wife and children in his arms and wept and wept and wept until he couldn't weep anymore, and he felt clean and whole. After which they all went to dinner in a typically excellent little country French restaurant, had a long and satisfying meal, and spoke of everything but the days Meyer Salzman had spent in a nearby orphanage under the name of Michel LeBlanc.