

INSIDE

Book Review 2
 Comics 8
 New on Video 7
 Newsmakers 2
 Television 6
 Top Video Rentals 7

Magazine

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Pope biographer aims to heal

In "Building Bridges," a Polish Jew reflects on her friendship with John Paul II and our capacity for good.

By David O'Reilly
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

It should come as no surprise to her friends and students that Lena Allen-Shore's new biography of Pope John Paul II is a big kiss of a book.

After all, the idea for *Building Bridges* — her account of their separate childhoods in Poland, and their unlikely friendship late in life — sprang from a kiss.

"Who am I? A Polish Jew who is nobody," this diminutive adjunct professor at Gratz College said

Tuesday during a lunch break from her classes.

After 25 years of their acquaintance, Allen-Shore still shakes her head in wonder sometimes that the leader of the world's one billion Catholics not only writes to her, and not only invited her to join him at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem in 2000, but last year celebrated her birthday at his suite in the Vatican, where he joined her family in singing "Happy Birthday."

In Polish, of course.

"They mean so much to me," she said, meaning John Paul and his private secretary, Archbishop Stanislaus Dziwisz. "They give me so much support."

Her warmth and passion for life help explain her remarkable friendship with the man she calls "Holy Father." But despite her protests, Allen-Shore is not nobody.

During World War II, she and her family masqueraded as Catholics to avoid extermination as Jews, and as a teenager she vowed she would devote her life to promoting ethnic and religious harmony if she survived.

Allen-Shore, who has high cheekbones, See **FRIENDSHIP** on E3



JONATHAN WILSON / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Lena Allen-Shore of Philadelphia befriended the Pope shortly after his election in 1978.

'Building Bridges' of goodwill

FRIENDSHIP from E1

bones and blue eyes, declines to give her age, but is a younger contemporary of John Paul, who is 83.

Since 1984 she has been an adjunct instructor at Gratz, teaching teachers about the Holocaust, art history, self-esteem, and overcoming prejudice, and "The Meaning of Life."

She teaches in a ground-floor classroom at her West Park apartment building on Ford Road and, like *Building Bridges*, her classes are heartfelt and personal.

"Einstein did not lose contact with his spirituality," she told a dozen students, all schoolteachers, at the start of Tuesday's course on spirituality.

During the next two hours, she strolled the room quoting Immanuel Kant on the uses of imagination, Emerson on the uses of experience, and then gathered her students around a Rembrandt etching to illustrate his "respect for human dignity."

When a late-arriving student handed her a dozen roses, she stopped to recall how, years before on the French Cote d'Azur, "I once imagined a war with people pelting one another only with flowers."

Minutes later she was sitting at an upright piano, singing one of her own songs, "Jerusalem," about the Holocaust.

Posing as Catholic to survive, she vowed to live for harmony.

"It's cold outside ... The joy is gone. ... Where should

I go, all alone?" she asks. Her father answers in a dream: "Go out and face life once again."

Her class grinned and clapped when she stood.

"Just this morning I looked at the trees outside my window and thought, 'There will never again be another Aug. 12, 2003.'"

"How do you teach your students not to take life for granted?" she asked them.

Asked what he thought was the connecting thread in her classes, Mike Greene, a teacher at Henry Lee Elementary School in Philadelphia who has taken eight of her courses, replied: "She teaches you to love life and live it with a conscience."

David Samplasky, a reading teacher at Lawton Elementary School in Philadelphia who has taken six courses, replied: "She teaches you to do the things you can do in life. To give the gifts you can give. ... She's an amazing person."

One woman simply tapped her heart in reply.

Allen-Shore first wrote to John Paul in October 1978, days after the white puff of smoke over the Vatican announced his election as history's first Polish pope.

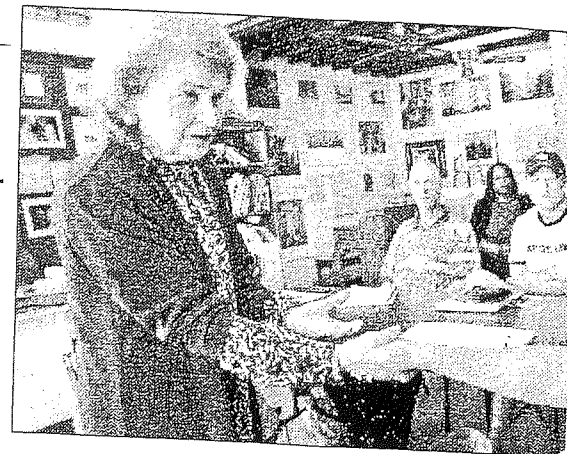
She sent him two of her books and told him of her pride and hope at his election. To her great surprise he replied, and they continued to correspond.

As their friendship grew, he even enclosed unconsecrated communion wafers as a symbol of their Jewish-Christian bond, but they did not meet in person for 18 years, until June 13, 1996.

Accompanied by one of her two grown sons, Jacques, a lawyer in Toronto, she and John Paul met in his private study at the Vatican, where they spoke of their childhoods near Krakow, about raising her boys alone after their father died, her teaching, and their mutual friend, the late Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia. She read John Paul a long poem about the Holocaust.

The meeting lasted 45 minutes, after which he stood and gave her a rosary and other tokens. Before they parted, John Paul took Jacques' head in both hands and kissed him on the forehead — the kiss that led to *Building Bridges*.

"I was so surprised," Allen-Shore recalled. "But the Holy Father knew Jackie had lost his father at age 11, and he knew



JONATHAN WILSON / Inquirer
In a class discussing spirituality, Lena Allen-Shore talks with student Pamela Corcoran. Allen-Shore teaches at Gratz College.

what it felt like because he lost his own mother at 9. So this was his way of comforting him."

It was the emotional stamp to an emotional meeting.

"He is only goodness," Jacques said later, and that day urged his mother to write an account of their acquaintance.

She agreed, and with no advance or publisher spent the next six years writing it. The result is *Building Bridges*, an over-

size, illustrated account of their youths in Poland and their public careers that includes several long poems by her about him.

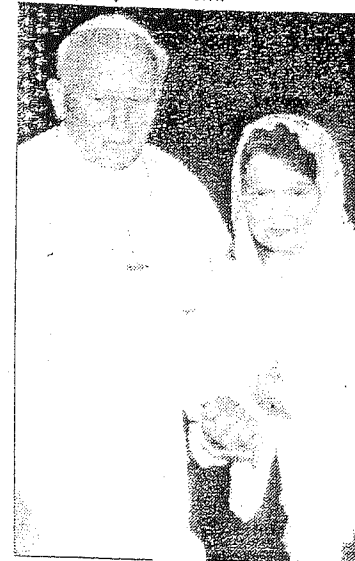
The \$39.95 book was published last month by Cathedral Press, an imprint of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore, and is available in Catholic bookstores and through Internet vendors such as Amazon.com.

The Baltimore Sun called it "a moving book that traces her im-

mense respect for John Paul — but, more than that, her conviction that the Earth for all its miseries is far fuller of good than of evil."

She will be signing the book Sept. 13 at 1 p.m. at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington.

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The Pope with Allen-Shore.