

A monument of Good Deeds

Eli Rubenstein

Many years ago, I came across a fragment of a story that still haunts me to this day. As I remember it, two little Jewish boys – brothers – were playing soccer with their friends in a Lithuanian town during World War II. Their game was abruptly interrupted by a Nazi roundup and the two boys were immediately dispatched to an awaiting cattle car. As the wagon left the station, it passed the very soccer field where the boys had just been playing. There was a small crack on one of the sides of the train which allowed the boys to peer through and catch a small glimpse of the outside world – and the soccer field. What did they see? Their friends continuing to play soccer, charging up and down the field, as if nothing had happened.

The two Jewish boys were heading toward an almost certain death, and to their friends it seemed to not matter one bit. Half a century later, the brothers are still troubled by this image of indifference and apathy they witnessed from a small crack in a train on the way to their deportation.

This tiny fragment of a story, this ever so brief moment in time, is this not the entire story of the Holocaust? Is not apathy and indifference in the face of utter cruelty and barbarity the most apt description of what took place during the Kingdom of Night?

Yet there is another story which also must be told, a story involving courage, bravery and altruism beyond belief, where people took enormous risks – and even sacrificed their lives – to save others.

Why must this other side be told? So the entire picture of the Holocaust is properly shown. So that the study of the Holocaust does not cause us to give up completely on humanity. So that these courageous people can serve as role models in our own lives.

Naomi Azrieli has expressed this point so eloquently. She said that no one survived the Holocaust without the help of another. It could have been a hiding place, an extra ration, a pair of shoes – even a kind gesture. It is these acts of nobility we must remember, along with acts of Nazi horror and cruelty and the collaboration of others, that we are so familiar with.

For this reason, in most recent years, on programs like the March of the Living and March of Remembrance and Hope, a meeting with one of the Righteous Among the Nations is always included. Our young people must be given hope for the future and an understanding that evil was indeed resisted during the darkest of times – and can still be confronted today.

It is especially important to tell the stories of courage and altruism expressed by people who were not Jewish toward

Jewish victims of the Holocaust, in most cases risking their lives and their families to save a complete stranger; they were not saving family members, friends, acquaintances, or even people from the same cultural background. They often had nothing in common – except for their humanity.

A little Jewish girl slipped out of the Czernowitz ghetto to the alien side. A Nazi caught her, and believing she was a Christian girl, informed her he would personally walk her home. He took her by the hand and ordered her to lead the way to her parents home. Terrified about what would happen to her and her family if she led the soldier back to the ghetto, she decided she would take the Nazi to the home of someone on the Aryan side. But who? Suddenly she remembered the address of a famous opera singer, and that is where she led the soldier. When they arrived at the home, the singer answered the door. The soldier explained to her that he had found her daughter wandering in the streets. Without pause, the woman started to berate the girl for being such a difficult child, forcefully pulled her into the house, quickly thanked the soldier for his efforts and slammed the door shut. When the door was firmly barred, and the soldier was gone, the woman ended her tirade, looked at the girl with kindness in her eyes, and simply said, “You’re a Jewish girl aren’t you?”

In a split second, this woman not only had the moral courage, but the moral imagination to take the steps that would save a life, the life of someone she had never met before in her life.

In Albania, the Nazis knocked on the door of a Muslim family hiding a Jewish boy, demanding they give up their Jewish guest. The Muslim father insisted there were no Jews in his home, only his two sons. But the Nazi insisted that the Muslim father only had one son. “Now is the time to show who we are,” the father said as he looked at his true son.

“Who is the Jew?” the Nazi asked again.

His real son then stepped forward and was shot.

During the 1932-1933 Holodomor, the Stalinist man-made famine that resulted in the deaths of millions of ethnic Ukrainians, Andrei Novikov, a starving Ukrainian was saved by Jewish villagers.

But years later, when the Nazis deported the Jews from the town that had sheltered him, there was nothing Novikov could do. Except for one thing. The only thing the Jews of the village asked Andrei to do was to remember them after their death.

So Andrei Novikov committed to memory the 127 names of the Jews that were deported and, years later, sent the list of the names of his martyred Jewish friends to Yad Vashem, in Israel.



Jerzy Kozminski, centre, hid 13 Jews during the Holocaust. He met with Canadian students in Poland who travelled there on a recent trip of the March of Remembrance and Hope. With him, from left, are Alyssa Idler, Carolyn Bartlett, Tashauna Reid and Nahayat Tizhoosh.

Let me close with one final story recounted by Israeli Holocaust survivor and historian Israel Gutman.

“A Jew... knocked on the door of a poor farmer’s cottage and asked for food. They let him in and discovered that he had been wandering about in the woods for several days with his wife and two children. The poor peasants took them all in. In time, the two families bonded so well that they became as one. One day, the farmer returned from a trip to a neighbouring village and told them that the Germans found a Jewish family sheltered there and murdered them all, both the Jews and the Polish family hiding them. They all lapsed into silence. The Jews realized that they couldn’t keep endangering their Polish protectors so during the night, they packed up their belongings. In the morning, the Poles came to their room. “We’ve been talking about this. Stay. Whatever happens to you, will happen to us.” And these people survived.

The story symbolizes the most noble in values that can be found among people who, only recently, had been complete strangers to each other. The poor farmer and his wife first offer food to an even poorer, starving Jewish man, then they rescue him and his entire family. Then the Jewish family decide they cannot place the Polish family at risk, and resolve to leave – but the Polish man and woman insist they stay, telling them: “What happens to you, will hap-

pen to us.” Are there any more beautiful words than these that were ever spoken during the Holocaust?

Twelve-year-old Donia Rosen wrote in her diary on June 23, 1943, hiding in the forest after the murder of her family....

“Words fail me, but I must write, I must. I want to ask you not to forget the dead. I want to beg you with all my heart that... you establish a memorial to us, a monument that reaches the sky, a mark that will be seen throughout the world – a statue not of marble and not of stone, but of good deeds. For I believe with a full and perfect faith that only such a monument can ensure you and your children a better future, and then the evil that seized control of the world... will not return.”

Those who resisted Nazi tyranny during the Kingdom of Night have left us a monument of good deeds. It is in their footsteps, in the example of these heroic individuals, and in homage to their exceptional spirit, that we, even in the smallest way, must try to emulate their actions. It would be the greatest and most profound tribute to their courageous spirit and at the same time an utter rejection of everything the Nazis stood for.

Eli Rubenstein is National Director of March of the Living Canada, a program funded by UJA Federation of Greater Toronto and UIA Federations Canada, as well as founder of the Canadian March of Remembrance and Hope program.