

When Risk-taking Becomes a Victim

Joseph Hanania | Fri. May 06, 2005

Next week, the German people will inaugurate a Holocaust memorial of undulating concrete steles on five acres of prime Berlin real estate, just a stone's throw from Hitler's bunker. Perhaps it is time, then, for we Jews to also reevaluate our world view vis á vis the Holocaust.

Yes, one third of our people were systematically murdered. Yes, few would minimize the suffering of survivors or the injustices still being uncovered.

However, an overemphasis on past victimization also results in a reluctance to take risks. And sometimes, taking measured risks is necessary to secure, over the longer term, what we now merely cling on to by our fingernails. A review of Holocaust history demonstrates that those Jews who proactively took measured risks often bucked the horrific odds and saved not only their own lives, but also those of others.

Risking imprisonment by the Nazis' allies in Hungary, the Arrow Cross Party, Jewish doctor Bela Elak insisted he had diplomatic immunity while repeatedly driving by lines of desperate Jews, pulling the worst off into his car and taking them to safe houses. Wilhelm Bachner, a Jewish engineer and manager for a Nazi firm in Warsaw, likewise provided jobs and false identity cards to 50 other Jews, saving their lives.

But it was Aron Grunhut, a wealthy goose liver merchant from Bratislava, who was surely the most visionary Jewish rescuer of all, engineering half a dozen rescues that saved more than 2,000 lives.

His most dramatic rescue began in July 1939, when he chartered two steamships to sail the Danube River from Bratislava to the Black Sea, where he had a freighter waiting to take some 1,350 refugees — plus one born at sea — on to Palestine.

So, how did Grunhut do it?

He took measured risks, most notably performing a secret mission for the former British consul to Bratislava, who was hardly a friend to Jews. In return, he obtained permission for his passengers to enter Palestine legally.

Even before his epic transport, however, Grunhut had repeatedly negotiated with adversaries to save Jewish lives.

During the winter of 1938-1939, he recruited an insider from the office of Karol Sidor, Czechoslovakia's secretary of internal affairs, while also helping instruct Jewish youth in street fighting. Tipped off in advance, the "Maccabi Youth" successfully beat back a mob descending on Bratislava's Jewish quarters — a vivid contrast to Jewish surprise during Germany's larger and deadlier *Kristallnacht*.

Aided by that same insider, Grunhut later convinced Sidor to allow Jewish refugees to leave an icy no man's zone and instead take shelter in a closed summer restaurant. The restaurant owners with whom he negotiated his short-term lease? Two Nazi brothers.

Grunhut also traveled to Nazi-occupied Austria, where he met with a Gestapo lawyer and secured the release of

Juda Goldberger, a Bratislava clothing merchant kidnapped by a Gestapo officer who owed him money. Working with Bratislava's chief of police, Grunhut then helped the merchant and his family flee to America on a rabbinic passport.

So radical were Grunhut's actions that Jewish community leaders, citing his dealing with Jewish adversaries, expelled him from the Hicem migration organization in early 1939. On the day his transport was to launch, they tried to have him arrested.

When Grunhut returned to Bratislava — rather than continuing on to safety in Palestine — those same Jewish leaders organized a communal trial in which they accused Grunhut of having led his charges to exile and death. Only after receiving telegrams from passengers disembarking in Palestine did they later drop the charges — and then ask Grunhut, unfortunately too late, to organize another transport for them.

And yet, Jewish heroes such as Grunhut, Elak and Bachner have gone largely unrecognized even by Yad Vashem, whose 51-year-old charter limits it to recognizing only righteous gentiles.

Only recently have a handful of Jewish historians, most notably Sam Oliner at Humboldt State University in California, begun pushing for recognition of Jewish Holocaust heroes. This is more than just a question of historical accuracy. Such an expanded understanding is particularly relevant given the present threat faced by the Jewish state.

Grunhut would undoubtedly advocate negotiating with the enemy, relinquishing barely defensible parts of the occupied territories — and the moral and military strains they put on Israel — in return for a stronger position. His mind would concentrate like a laser, not on how to best debate biblical claims, but on how to most effectively promote Jewish interests.

Attuned to present circumstances, he would probably cite the Berlin Holocaust memorial as further evidence of a 180-degree change of attitude among Germans, while noticing that the new Palestinian leadership is making moves far beyond Yasser Arafat's grievance-dominated thinking. He would likewise insist that Jewish leaders think "out of the box," and thereby ensure a more secure future.

Nor would he regard such dealings as appeasement.

Indeed, Grunhut remained in Europe even as the Holocaust moved into full swing, helping charter a train in 1943 to take Jewish children from Budapest to Tehran. On the side, he paid off the engineers to detour to Palestine, thus saving another 350 Jewish lives.

Grunhut died of old age in Israel in 1974, a judicious risk taker who won big time. Now might be the time to dust off his memory, and those of Elak and Bachner, and just maybe learn from their examples.

Joseph Hanania is the author of "From the Jaws of Death," a forthcoming book on Aron Grunhut.

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