

Oral History Society

Sharing a Legacy of Rescue

Author(s): Marta Fuchs Winik

Source: *Oral History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, War and Peace (Autumn, 1997), pp. 74-79

Published by: Oral History Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179619>

Accessed: 22/11/2009 21:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ohs>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oral History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Oral History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

SHARING A LEGACY OF RESCUE*

MARTA FUCHS WINIK

It was in the Spring of 1944 that my father met Zoltán Kubinyi, his last commanding officer and the man who saved his life and lost his own.

My father, like other Hungarian Jewish men of military age during the Holocaust, was taken away in 1940 to a forced-labour battalion, part of the Nazi-allied Hungarian army. It would be five years before he would return home to Tokaj as the sole survivor of his family. On the eve of Allied victory, in that same Spring of '44, his brother, two sisters, and all their children, along with the majority of Jews of Hungary, were deported to Auschwitz, where, in the euphemism of survivors, 'they remained.'

A man in his early forties, Zoltán Kubinyi was a Seventh Day Adventist. He had fought in the Spanish Civil War against the fascists, and now was a conscientious objector. My father remembers he never wore a gun in his holster.

The labour battalion, number 108/ 52, was comprised of Jewish men from the northeastern countryside of Hungary. That spring they were situated in the Bryanszk Forest in Russia, which was occupied by the German military forces for whom they worked. In Hungarian my father told me what happened there:



The author's father, Morton Fuchs, 1931. Born Miksa Fuchs, 30 June 1911, Tokaj, Hungary.

How he came to us was very interesting. By that time, many men, especially the older ones, had died from malnutrition and the harsh conditions. In the Bryanszk Forest, some of the men had made contact with the partisans who said, 'Listen, why don't you just overpower your guards, steal their rifles, and join us?' There ensued from that a very heated discussion among the men in the labour camp, and various sides were taken. I was opposed to the idea. I and a few others pleaded with the rest to stay and not endanger everyone else. I said, 'Here are these men, these guards. They haven't done anything; they're just here on duty. The other thing is, look, there are a number of people here who are in various states of health. Some are malnourished or sickly, or not walking very well. They wouldn't be able to keep up with us healthy ones. Aren't we endangering their lives inordinately by taking them out of this difficult but orderly life and taking them with us and running into the forest?'

So, there was no general uprising. But a few days later, a couple of men who were driving the wagons went to town to get some supplies and never returned. The following day we went out to work, and twenty men didn't come back. All of them went over to the partisans. The next day, again, between twenty and twenty-five men disappeared. The commanding officer said, 'The results of this are not going to be pretty,' and told the men, 'I'm going into headquarters and ask for authorization for decimation.' That would mean that they would line us up and shoot every tenth man. After the commanding officer left, we were kept inside the compound, not allowed to work out in the forest. All day we waited anxiously, not knowing who among us would be the ones to be killed when he returned.

Well, on his way in a horse and wagon to Gomel, where the headquarters of the German command was located, a truck was approaching him. His horse bolted in fright, running the wagon into the ditch, and the officer was thrown out and broke his leg. The driver got him to the hospital and went to headquarters to report the accident, but he didn't indicate why the officer was intending to come there. Another commanding officer was sent out to replace him.

This new commanding officer came later that day in the same wagon and the driver, one of the Jewish men, explained the situation to him. As soon as the officer arrived, he called us together and said, 'I have

*Excerpt from a book by Marta Fuchs Winik and Henry Fuchs, *Fragments of a Family: Remembering Hungary, the Holocaust, and Emigration to a New World* (to be published).

heard what has happened here. I can certainly understand the motivation for people to do this, to try to escape. But you have to understand that I cannot shield you from consequences of attempting to do so. So if you will all stop trying to escape, I will try to protect you.' From that day on, everyone agreed implicitly to that, and from that first day, things were better.

Zoltán Kubinyi was very different from all the commanding officers we had before him. The rest had been cruel, treated us horribly. We still worked long, hard days with little food. But he was kind and respectful to us. He protected us against the abusive German orders for physical labour by negotiating on our behalf. He always saw to it that we had humane lodging and enough food.

He also took an interest in our religious practices. On Yom Kippur, like every other day, we worked, and of course we all fasted. He came out to the fields and fasted along with us and allowed us to pray during breaks. Somehow, he managed to arrange an extra ration of food for us that evening.

My best friend, Isaac Guttman, was this short, little, thin boy, very weak constitutionally, but a great scholar, very educated and cultured. He was very knowledgeable in Judaism also. And someone called the commanding officer's attention to this man, that he was weak physically. He didn't eat anything at all because he was strictly kosher. He only ate bread and jam and margarine. He lived on this for years.

So the commanding officer appointed him the camp rabbi, and he didn't have to go out to work. Instead, once on Sunday or Saturday, I no longer remember, he had to deliver a speech. He very nicely prepared it and quoted something from the Torah, and he spoke to us about that in Hungarian. This was the extent of his duties. He was the camp clergyman.

One morning when we were being marched somewhere along a road and took a break, we all put on our *tefillin* and started our morning prayers. Suddenly, we saw some soldiers and officers coming toward us in trucks. We quickly took off our *tefillin* and put them away, but my friend Isaac Guttman just continued to pray. We urged him to stop, that he was putting all of us in danger. But what our commanding officer did was have this young Jew sit in the covered transport in his place so that he could finish his prayers and not be caught. We resumed marching, with our commanding officer marching alongside us, as the group of officers passed us without a problem.

The commanding officer was such a fine man. When somebody was smoking on Saturday, he would say, 'Why are you smoking Saturday? This is forbidden by your religion, that there should be smoking on Saturday.' And if his boots were in the workshop to be repaired and they weren't ready on Friday, he sent his servant to bring them because he

didn't want Jews to work on his boots on Saturday.

Once when we were clearing a big forest, moving trees that had been felled, a German officer— we were working closely with the German army— shouted to us, 'One man, one tree!' Well, that's very hard to carry a big log by yourself. Our commanding officer went over and said to the German officer, 'It's faster if a man is on each end.' Of course he didn't say it was also easier for the men. So in ways like this he would intercede to make everyday work a bit easier.

At the very end, he received orders to march us toward Germany to a concentration camp. But instead, he sabotaged the orders and marched us in the opposite direction, back to Hungary. He arranged to have us hidden in farm houses along the way.

At one point, he hid us on a farm near the city of Miskolc in Hungary. Our group of now approximately 140 Jewish men did farm work for which we received food and lodging. We had worked there for a few weeks when Hungarian military policemen, under orders from the Germans, appeared and arrested us all. Apparently, some neighbours had reported seeing us.

Kubinyi was helpless to protect us from the all-powerful military police. They ordered us to immediately march in the direction of Germany. We were marching for a few days in a difficult and exhausting manner. At night we lodged in village stables. During this time, Kubinyi was always with us and always tried to help us.

Finally, in the middle of one night as we were all sleeping in a barn, we awoke to whispering and quiet movements. Kubinyi was whispering with great agitation: 'Come quickly and quietly. We need to leave in a hurry.' We didn't know until afterwards that some of the men had gotten the military policemen nice and drunk, and when they finally fell fast asleep, Kubinyi came to get us so we could escape. We marched and ran as fast as we could the entire night in the opposite direction.

After two to three days, we arrived in a big city, Balasgyamát in Hungary, where we could hear the booming of cannons, which meant the Soviet military forces were very close. Our liberation was imminent. All around us we heard the explosion of bombs, and the people of the city were seeking shelter in the bomb shelters and cellars. Kubinyi took care of us and sheltered us in different cellars as well. Nobody could sleep because we were all frightened, and the war noises came closer and closer.

At daybreak the noises subsided and we awoke to hearing for the first time the voices of soldiers speaking Russian, instead of Hungarian. We carefully peeked out and slowly emerged from the cellar, and realized that the town was being liberated, that the War was over. We saw a group of Russian soldiers

turning into the yard. Obviously they knew who we were because they saw our yellow arm bands with the labour camp numbers, and they were very friendly to us. They went from house to house to look for German soldiers.

Suddenly the streets were filled with people. From everywhere Hungarian soldiers and the forced-labour camp members came out of hiding. We ran out, and as Hungarian soldiers were scurrying to quickly change into civilian clothes and hide among the peasants so as not to be caught, we warned and pleaded with Zoltán Kubinyi to do the same. But he refused, saying, 'No, I will not. I haven't done anything wrong. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I am proud to have saved the lives of you men. I'm an honourable member of the Hungarian Officer Corp. I'm proud to be a member of the Hungarian Army. Nothing will happen to me.' As the Russian soldiers came to arrest him, we pleaded with them as well, protesting, 'This is a good man! He saved our lives!' They would not listen and took him away.

The Russians gathered all of us in a city square. The labour camp men and those in civilian clothes were separated into one group, and all those wearing uniforms into another. They took our group to a sugar factory in the nearby city of Hatvan, where we worked for a couple of days until our discharge papers were completed and we were set free. The other group with the military uniforms, including Zoltán Kubinyi, we later heard was taken to Russia.



Zoltán Kubinyi.

Some of the men knew he had a wife and child living in Budapest. We took turns sending her packages of basic food supplies, for life was hard for everyone after the War. These monthly packages went on for a year or more, and I remember each time it was my turn, she wrote a nice thank-you note. With one of these she included a picture of him. In response to the last package, she said not to send any more because she had found a good job and could now provide for herself and the child on her own. At the same time, she wrote that she had received word from Russia. Her husband had died in a labour camp in Siberia.

When my father first recounted these events ten years ago, he was embarrassed and ashamed that he could not remember his commanding officer's name. 'It was over forty years ago,' I offered, but it was little comfort to him as he continued shaking his head. 'But here is his picture.' He pulled from his files an old envelope with the black and white photograph he had received decades ago and which he had packed along with the barest of essentials when we escaped from Hungary in the wake of the 1956 Revolution. Never had I seen this picture before. Never had we discussed in detail, until now in my late thirties, what happened to my father during the Holocaust.

I turned to him with resolve: 'We must find out his name. We must have him honoured at Yad Vashem as a Righteous Gentile.' In the midst of all the horror, this one man acted at great personal risk to save his fellow human beings. The world must know.

My father began writing. Perhaps one of his labour camp friends might remember. Perhaps the one in New York or the other in Budapest. A few months later they both wrote back. Unfortunately, neither could remember the name, but sent their own recollections testifying to the officer's goodness. One also mentioned that he had written to another labour camp friend in Hungary. Perhaps he would remember. Several more months passed, and one night my father called to say he had received a letter that day. Finally, forty years later, he knew his commanding officer's name once again.

We quickly prepared the documentation and included the testimony of my father's friend Isaac Guttman as a required witness. In his testimony, Isaac Guttman wrote, 'A day before we were liberated, the cooking was very disorganized. Zoltán Kubinyi was looking for me to make sure I had food to eat. He brought me some cooked potatoes because he knew and respected that I, being a very religious man, didn't eat from the regular food. He was a very religious Seventh Day Adventist and many times we used to discuss together passages from the Bible. On his holster around his waist, he never wore the pistol he was supposed to because it was forbidden to carry weapons according to his religious beliefs.'

In his letter to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem, my father summed up his testimony

with the following words:

Zoltán Kubinyi was a true human being in the deepest sense of the word. During this catastrophic event, when civilized, intelligent people were blinded with irrational hatred, and innocent people, mothers with babies in their arms were slaughtered, HE WAS A MAN. Risking his own life, he stood up for and defended the innocent persecuted people.

The memory of Zoltán Kubinyi deserves the highest honor that a person could possibly deserve for his altruistic, heroic, and self-sacrificing activities.

Over the years, we tried searching for Zoltán Kubinyi's wife and son. I wanted to meet them and thank them for my father's life, and therefore my own. Because of people like Zoltán Kubinyi, Hitler's 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question,' nearly foolproof in extinguishing the Jews of Europe, at least failed to work completely. Over a hundred men were saved, and as a result, members of a generation that wasn't supposed to have been born had the chance to be.

The last my father heard, Zoltán Kubinyi's wife and son had moved from Budapest to Miskolc. On trips back to Hungary, I looked in phone books and started calling the Kubinyis listed, but having to leave before completing my search, I asked our friends Miki and Judit in our hometown of Tokaj for help. Months later, I received a letter from Judit. She had found the family and spoken with the son's wife while he was at work. Unfortunately, his mother had passed away a year or so before. Sadly the wife added, 'She never believed her husband had died and spent her days praying and waiting for him to come back.'

My father immediately wrote to the son, sending him a copy of the documentation we had submitted to Yad Vashem. For verification, the son sent back a copy of his father's identity card which featured the same photograph my father had shown me. Alongside it was a copy of his own card. As I looked into the eyes of Márton Gábor Kubinyi — only six months old when his father went off to war — I wondered what it must have been like for him not to know his father, and to now learn, nearly fifty years later, how much he means to others.

In February 1994 in a nationally televised ceremony in Budapest, Márton Gábor Kubinyi received the Medallion of Honour on behalf of his father, posthumously honoured as a 'Righteous Among the Nations.' A tree had also been planted in Zoltán Kubinyi's memory in The Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem.

On 29 May 1994, at a Fiftieth Anniversary Commemoration in Tokaj in memory of the Tokaj Jews who were destroyed in 1944, I spoke about Zoltán Kubinyi and finally met his son. Over 200 people gathered on the top floor of the Tokaj Synagogue, under reconstruction to be a cultural centre, for the first Holocaust Commemoration ever in the town. Attending were Miki and Lajcsi, along with their families, the only Jews who remain in Tokaj today. Born after the War, like my brother Henry and I, they are our childhood friends.

Some survivors from the surrounding area came, but the majority present were the non-Jewish townspeople. Why did they come? Partly out of curiosity, I imagine; partly because it was a big event in a small town; and partly to mourn the loss of their Jewish friends and neighbours, who before the War had comprised almost one-quarter of the town's population.

Jews and non-Jews had lived side by side in harmony in Tokaj, a picture-perfect little town world famous for its wines, and a pocket of sanity in a country that became fiercely anti-Semitic like its neighbours. Out of 1,400 Jews in a town of 5,000, less than 100 survived the Holocaust. And most of them, like us, left in '56. In the words of Tokaj's young mayor, Janos Majer: 'To this day, the town has not been able to recover from this loss of blood. [. . .] The region had lost its intellectual and economic leadership which kept this town amongst the most outstanding nationwide.'

The programme began with the unexpected. A local rabbi asked all the Jewish men present to join him up front for afternoon prayers. It had been decades since the century-old synagogue had reverberated with the ancient sounds of Hebrew. As I watched my brother *davening* alongside the dozen or so men, I wondered what the townspeople thought. This must be so strange and foreign to them, particularly to the younger generation that had not grown up amidst the vibrant Jewish life that once flourished in their community.

Some speeches followed, interspersed with classical music beautifully played by students and staff from a nearby music academy.

It is my turn to speak. I cannot keep the papers of my speech from shaking in my hands as I stand before the bare microphone. Complete silence falls as I begin to tell the story of a man who rescued some men, some of the only Jewish men from this town who survived.

As I finish saying that Márton Gábor Kubinyi recently received the commendation on behalf of his father, everyone bursts into applause which spontaneously becomes rhythmic, indicating that he should stand up. The mayor, from the front row, throws me a worried look, 'Is he here?' In all the frenzy of preparations, no one had remembered to check if the son had even arrived for the commemoration. I finish the last line of my speech, and taking a chance, ask if Márton Gábor Kubinyi would please stand up.

Everyone turns around with great anticipation, but we see no one. Finally, way in the back a man's head slowly appears, barely visible above the crowd. Suddenly, I'm torn. I want to march straight back and shake his hand and say 'Thank you, thank you for your father, thank you for helping me believe there is goodness in the world'. But it would take so long to get all the way back to him. Can I burden everyone by doing so? By doing something for me, something restorative to my faith in others in the midst of all this Holocaust horror? The vastness of space lies ahead of me, yet I feel the immediacy of time, of history, pushing me to reach out for the goodness this man represents.

I try to soften the clicking of my heels as I move across the concrete floor, and try to contain the feelings swirling within me. I can barely breathe. This is a moment in history. A punctuation of events that happened fifty years ago.

I approach the son and look into his eyes, likewise filled with tears, and think: 'Neither of us knew your father, but both our lives have been defined by him.' We shake hands, and he leans down and kisses mine in the age-old tradition of gentility. 'I am happy to meet you. We will talk, then, afterwards at the dinner,' I say.

'I want to thank you for your father. I am here, in this world, because of what he did in saving *my* father. But *you* didn't have a father to love you and raise you like *I* had.'

My words in Hungarian came out haltingly as I tried to express my gratitude mixed with sorrow, sorrow for the loss of his father and the hardships he, a fatherless child after the War, must have had to endure. A myriad of questions I have long wanted to ask him clamoured in my head as I fought against my instinct to protect him and not intrude.

Had he known any of this about his father before he received my father's letter? How much had he already known from letters his mother received from the labour-camp men when they sent the care packages after the War? Yes, he had known about the events of the War, not from letters his mother received, but word from a few soldiers who came back from captivity in Russia, bringing back his father's identification. But his mother never received official notification of his father's death. Only recently, when they appealed to the Hungarian government for some restitution, did they find out that his father had died from typhus. The Red Cross had helped in getting the information and verification.

How did he feel when he received my father's letter and the documentation? 'I cried right away,' his wife immediately answered. I can't remember what, if anything, the son said, but I recall thinking he must have been filled with mixed emotions, emotions that defy expression in words. 'He was very angry at times that he didn't have a father, that his mother quit her job, and as a result, he had to quit school and start working at age fourteen,' his wife explained. 'And she became quite fanatical, praying all the time for her husband's return.' A bus driver in Miskolc for many years, 'He has worked hard all his life. That's how he knows how to do everything,' his wife proudly stated, 'like all the various aspects to building that we are doing on our house. And I do the letter writing he doesn't like to do,' she added, chuckling.

With the clanging of utensils and platters being passed around, and several conversations going on around us, it was difficult to hear everything the son and his wife were saying. Also, some of the Hungarian was hard for me to understand. As I listened with Henry sitting next to me, also earnestly asking questions, it felt like listening through a veil, trying to understand each word, each space between the words that vibrated with possibility and meaning too overwhelming to assimilate.



Morton and Ilona Fuchs, February 1996 (married fifty years).

Finally, I asked the crucial question that has been haunting me for years: 'Why didn't your father take off his uniform and save himself as he had saved so many others?' Was it honour? Honour as a military officer and a deeply religious man? Was it pride? Pride in using his Nazi-allied uniform for the higher good? Did he really believe that nothing *would* happen to him? That the Russians would follow the Geneva Convention protocols for humane treatment of prisoners of war? (As it turned out, chief among those nations that did not adhere to the 1929 Convention were Russia and Japan.) Or did he say that to reassure his men? Was it principle above pragmatics? That his fundamental respect for others, the honesty, integrity, and conviction which must have compelled him to act with such courage to rescue others, transcended any consideration for himself and his family?

I offered some of these thoughts as we became locked in a mystery that was unsolvable yet full of consequence. Finally, the son answered, simply and with resignation, as if he had made peace with it all: 'I, too, have often thought about this question. I think he didn't take off his uniform because he was such a religious man, always was honest, never lied. And to do so would be to lie. He hadn't done anything wrong, so why should he take off the uniform?'

We looked at each other, trying to absorb those events before us and the repercussions they have had in our lives. Silently, they pulled out the certificate of commendation and the heavy silver medallion and placed them before Henry and me. As I started to pass them around to the others



Zoltán Kubinyi and his wife on the occasion of their engagement, November 1942.

at the table, the wife reached into her purse and took out a photograph. It showed Zoltán Kubinyi with his wife, a lovely young couple, smiling and looking radiant. 'Please have this from us,' she said to me.

Blinking away tears, I could barely see the picture in my hands. A happy life together, unjustly interrupted forever. 'Oh, no, I cannot accept this, if it is your only copy.' 'No,' the wife reassured me, 'we have another one. Please take it.'

I have shown the picture and told the story of Zoltán Kubinyi to my son. When my daughter is older, I will tell her the same: 'This is the man who saved your Grandpa's life. Like him, you too can act with courage and goodness. Though hatred and prejudice still permeate the world, you can make a difference. And his example can provide you with some comfort and inspiration, as it does for me. And it can give you hope for creating a better world to come.'