

Jews Who Saved Other Jews Memorialized

By Jerry Klinger



SAFED, Israel — The Hands of Choice, a memorial like none that has ever existed in Jewish history was installed last week in Safed, Israel. In over 3,500 years of Jewish history, no memorial has ever been created to honor Jews who chose to save Jews, even if it may have cost their own lives.

The memorial is not for Jews who were soldiers, partisans, medical or police personnel who risked all to save others. They each should have their own memorial. The memorial is to Jews who chose to save Jews when they did not have to. *Halacha* does not mandate that Jews should risk their lives to save other Jews.

The Hands of Choice was conceived and funded by the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation (JASHP), of which I serve as the president. It is the artistic expression of noted Jerusalem artist Sam Philipe. Sam has created several unique

memorials with the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation across Israel and others are planned internationally.

Sam's design is simple. It is two upturned hands cupping a Star of David. Each facet of the Star has a Jerusalem stone panel attached with names randomly written on it, like the stars of the heavens. The names are representative names of Jews from contemporary times reaching back thousands of years, of Jews who chose to save Jews. Names are Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, Amharic, Indian, even Old Hebrew.

There are ~four hundred names inscribed in Hebrew and English. There are many, many more names that sleep in the dark of the past lost from memory.

Few today have ever heard of Antonio Honem, Diogo Da Assumpcao, or Joseph ben Gershon of Rosheim.

They are names from a distant past.

Names from a more recent past are equally unknown, unremembered. Rabbi Bernard Cantor, an American, was on a rescue mission to save Jews in the Ukraine caught up in the Civil War pogroms. He was murdered there in 1920.

There are about 2,000 known names of Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust. Neither Yad Vashem, nor any Holocaust Museum or memorial, remembers even a tiny, tiny fraction of them. Jewish rescuers such as Jonas Eckstein who saved almost 2,000 Jews in Bratislava, are not known. Few remember Dr. Gisela Perl, herself a prisoner, who saved women from inside of Auschwitz.

Nazi policy was immediate. Any Jewish girl discovered to be pregnant was immediately shot. Perl acted in the night, going barrack to barrack, unknown to the Nazis. Perl was an abortionist who did the most horrible thing. She had to take life to save life. Hundreds of Jewish women lived to become mothers again.

Her name is juxtaposed on a Star panel with Shifra and Puah from the Bible. Pharaoh had commanded Shifra and Puah, Jewish midwives, to kill any male Jewish baby born. At the risk of their lives, they defied Pharaoh. They refused to kill the babies.

Nothing is absolute, even definitions, when and how Jews chose to save Jews if they did not have to.

Ten representative names of Machal, out of the 5,000 foreign Jews that volunteered, are on the Star. They had served in the Allied armies of WWII. They were experienced. They were trained to fight. They had risked their lives to end Fascism and really owed nothing more.

As Israel was being birthed, her desperation was acute. She faced extermination, a second Holocaust at the hands of much larger, better organized, equipped, and led Arab armies. It was virtually suicidal to volunteer to help Israel during its war of Independence. The Machal volunteers did not have to. They did. They went to save Jews. Some paid with their lives. Those who paid the ultimate price are still there.

There are untold numbers of Jews who saved Jews who are unknown. Some might be unknowable, but some, probably many, are behind the dark mist of time waiting to be discovered.

JASHP's motto is "shaping the future by remembering the past."

JASHP has told the City of Safed and the Ascent of Safed, partners in the Hands project, that it would be willing to help create and fund a program of annual recognition and memory. The program will be open to all Jews and friends everywhere to recommend candidates for remembrance..

A scroll of honor will be created and kept by the Mayor of Safed. Each year, names will be proffered, vetted, and added to the scroll of Jews who chose to save Jews. In an appropriate ceremony of honor, their names will live again, a blessing for today and tomorrow.