

Perseverance

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It's always wonderful when it all comes together. But it's even better when that occurs after having invested time and effort. The joy and sense of satisfaction one feels when the target is reached despite all the hindrances and pitfalls along the way often defies description. Indeed, the results sometimes even eclipse the initial hope.

The other day I was privy to a particularly emotive illustration of this, a story that spanned generations, a search across the decades, and an incredible demonstration of human kindness and sacrifice.

The story begins with two Slovakian brothers, Moshe/Moritz and Shimon/Ernest Honig. They came from a family of nine siblings and had already lost a brother and a sister in the war. Now, they were fighting to survive.

Moshe and Shimon were hiding from the Nazis on the farm of Slovakian farmer, Pavel Imrich. Pavel and his family faithfully provided the brothers with food and clothing during the war, selflessly disregarding the danger in which they were thereby placing themselves. The brothers hoped they would see out the war without having to leave the farm, but things were about to change.

Local townspeople noticed suspicious goings on at the farm and, suspecting that Pavel was hiding Jews, informed the Germans. The Germans immediately went to the farm to question him. As they walked around, they noticed some clothes hanging on a clothesline embroidered with the initials of the Honig brothers. With characteristic brutality, they conducted an immediate search of Pavel's home and the surrounding buildings. Moshe and Shimon, who had watched the Nazis' arrival, quickly went to hide beneath a pile of hay in a pig pen.

Whilst they were searching, the Nazis noticed the pile of hay. Not prepared to leave any stone unturned, they decided to poke their bayonets through the slats of the fence surrounding the pen and right into the hay, to ensure that nobody was hiding there. Shimon and Moshe watched with dread as the soldiers approached. Moments later, the first soldier drove his bayonet into the straw; but nothing happened. He tried again, but to no avail. Despite several stabs, the brothers remained uninjured. It was an open miracle.

The Germans, frustrated by their failure to find any Jews, decided to set fire to the entire barn, to make absolutely sure. Realising they were about to be burned alive, Moshe and Shimon started reciting viduy. As they were immersed in what they thought would be their final prayer to G-d on this earth, a strong gust of wind suddenly diverted the flames away from

their hiding place, and they were saved for a second time.

Years later, as Shimon lay on his deathbed, his son, Avichai, asked him whether he wanted to recite viduy. Shimon shook his head and, with great emotion, responded, "I do not need to say viduy; I have already recited it once in this lifetime."

Moshe and Shimon later learned that the Gestapo had arrested Pavel and had taken him in for questioning. They subjected him to brutal torture, suspending him by his ankles from a hook and spinning him to the left and to the right while beating him with sticks, all the while demanding to know whether the Jews were hiding. But Pavel did not break. Despite the violent interrogation, he refused to disclose the brothers' hideout.

Not wanting to risk their rescuer's life again, the brothers decided to leave the farm. With Hashem's help, they managed to survive the war, along with their parents and five of their siblings.

In telling over this story after the war, the brothers never mentioned the name of the place where they had been hidden, nor the identity of the farmer who had saved their lives. Their children asked many questions about the family's survival so that they could document the stories. But the brothers and their siblings spoke very little about their experiences; the pain ran too deep. There was therefore not much to go on other than the above story. But it was a start.

So, in 2010, Shimon's son, Avichai Honig, and his cousin, Dov Honig, travelled to Slovakia to try and unearth some more information. They were looking for a family named Horak, which they assumed was the name of the farmer's family. Miki Liptag, a priest who assisted Jews searching for their family roots in Slovakia, accompanied them to serve as a translator and to generally assist them with anything they needed. The three spared no efforts in searching, investigating and going through all available archive materials, but in vain.

In 2018, Miki contacted the Honig family with an unexpected development. A Czech couple, Frantisek and Lidia Bondra, had requested his help in tracing a family with the name Honig. Their interest stemmed from the fact that their grandfather had been the one responsible for saving Moshe and Shimon: Pavel Imrich.

Frantisek and Lidia had told Miki that in 2001, after a visit to Israel, they had shared their impressions of the Holy Land with Frantisek's mother. It was at that point that Frantisek's mother told them her parents had hidden Jews on their farm during the second world war. She said that her father had been

tortured by the Germans because of it. As far as she was able to recall, she thought that the survivors had been named Ernest and Moritz 'Heinich', or something similar.

Frantisek and Lidia immediately began looking for any information they could find on a Heinich family in Israel. They started with Yad Vashem and then consulted additional resources, but since they were searching under the wrong name their efforts met without success.

Then, in the summer of 2018, they had their first real breakthrough. The couple came across a sign that had been erected by the Stara Lubovna municipality in the area where the farm was located. The inscription on the sign stated that the area had been used to smuggle refugees from occupied Poland into Hungary. The names of the Slovak underground officers and local citizens who had been involved in the rescue missions were inscribed on the sign.

As Frantisek and Lidia scanned the list of names, two suddenly jumped out at them: Frantisek's grandfather, Pavel, and Ernest Honig. Recognising the name Ernest, they realised that they had been searching for the wrong family name all along. Consulting the municipality's local historian, they were referred to Miki Liptag, who connected the dots.

In February 2019, after ten years of searching, Frantisek and Lidia, accompanied by Miki, finally arrived in Jerusalem to meet the Honig family. It was an incredibly emotional reunion, the descendants of both rescuer and survivor finally coming face to face. Frantisek told the family that they organized a yearly event in Ostrava, Czech Republic, devoted to battling antisemitism and racial hatred. That year the event was being held in Stara Lubovna and would be dedicated to the story of the Honig family. Frantisek and Lidia invited them to participate and to share the family's story.

That year, 35 members of the Honig family attended the event and embraced the descendants of the people who had saved their parents, paying tribute to Pavel Imrich, the man who selflessly defied the Nazis to save this Jewish family.

The Honigs and the Imrichs could have given up their search many times. They had either no information, or misinformation. But they persevered, and ultimately their efforts bore fruit.

This story has many beautiful angles. But if I was to pinpoint what to my mind is the overarching theme, it is the portrayal of the very best of human nature.

And that's always something worth writing about.

S. B. Goitein welcomes comments, stories, feedback, and more at simche7@yahoo.com



A story
of human
kindness
and
tremendous
sacrifice.