



SDA Hero Saves Jews From Nazis

An unarmed Hungarian Adventist army officer leads 140 Jewish prisoners to freedom.

by *Marta Fuchs Winik*

MY FATHER MET ZOLTÁN KUBINYI, THE MAN who saved his life and then lost his own, in the spring of 1944. Like other Hungarian Jewish men of military age during the Holocaust, my father was taken in 1940 to a forced-labor battalion, part of the Nazi-allied Hungarian army. It would be five years before he returned home to Tokaj—the sole survivor in his family. In that same spring of 1944, his brother, two sisters, and all their children, along with the majority of Hungarian Jews, were deported to Auschwitz, where, in the euphemism of survivors, “they remained.”

Zoltán Kubinyi was in his early 40s when he was my father’s commanding officer. He was a Seventh-day Adventist. He had fought against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and now was a conscientious objector. My father remembers that he never wore a gun in

his holster.

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

By the time Zoltán Kubinyi came to us, many men, especially the older ones, had died from malnutrition and the harsh conditions. In the 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?” A heated discussion ensued among the men in the labor camp and people took various sides. I was opposed to the idea. I and a few others pleaded with the rest to stay and not endanger us. I said, “Here are these men, these guards. They haven’t done anything bad; they’re just here on duty. The other thing is, look, there are a number of people here who are in poor 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 place and running into the forest?”

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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 supplies and never returned. The following day we went out to work, and 20 men didn't come back. All of them went over to the partisans. The next day, again, between 20 and 25 men disappeared. The commanding officer said, "The results of this are not going to be pretty. I'm going to headquarters and asking for authorization for decimation." That meant 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 killed when the commander returned.

Well, on the officer's way to Gomel, where the headquarters of the German command was located, his horse bolted in fright when a truck approached, running the wagon into the ditch. The officer was thrown out and broke his leg. Another commanding officer was sent out to replace him and came later that day in the same wagon. 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 heard what has happened here. I can certainly understand people's motivation for trying to escape. But you have to understand that I cannot shield you from the consequences of attempting to do so. If you will all stop trying to escape, I will try to protect you." Everyone agreed to that, and from that first day, things were better.

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

Years later we learned that he had been christened in 1937 in Barcelona, and became a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. During the civil war in Spain, there were barely 2,000 Adventists and times were difficult. In 1942 he returned home and officially became an Adventist in the Hungarian Adventist church. He worked as a colporteur, then served as director of the religious liberty department. In January 1943, in the Szekély B. chapel in the Adventist headquar-

ters, he married an Adventist woman. A little more than a year later, in May 1944, he was drafted into military service as a lieutenant.

The Jewish prisoners noticed that Kubinyi took an interest in our religious practices. On Yom Kippur we worked like every other day, and of course we all fasted. He came out to the fields and fasted 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 also a rabbinical student, very knowledgeable in Judaism. And someone called the commanding officer's attention to this man, that he was physically weak. 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 would prepare it very nicely and quote something from the Torah, and he would speak to us about that in Hungarian. That was the extent of his duties. He was the camp clergyman.

One morning when we were being marched 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 the *tefillin* off and put them away, but my friend Isaac Guttman just continued to pray. We urged him to stop, and told him that he was putting all of us in danger. So, our commanding officer had this young Jew sit in the covered transport in his place, so that he could finish his prayers and not be caught. Our commanding officer marched alongside us as the group of soldiers passed without a problem.

The commanding officer was such a fine man. When somebody was smoking on Saturday he would say, "Why are you smoking on Saturday? This is forbidden by your religion, that there should be smoking on Saturday." When his boots were in the workshop to be repaired, if they weren't ready on Friday, he would send his servant to bring his boots 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, it’s very hard to carry a big log by yourself. Our commander told the German officer, “It’s faster if a man is on each end.” Of course, he didn’t say that it was also easier for the men. In such ways he would intercede to make everyday work a bit easier for us.

Finally, he received orders to march us toward Germany to a concentration camp. But he sabotaged the orders and marched us in the opposite direction, back to Hungary. He arranged to have us hidden in farmhouses along the way. At one point we hid on a farm near the city of Miskolc. 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 German orders, appeared and arrested us all. Apparently some neighbors had reported seeing us.

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

help us. Finally, in the middle of one night, we awoke to whispering and quiet movements. Kubinyi whispered, with great agitation, “Come quickly and quietly. We need to leave in a hurry.” Some of the men had gotten the military policemen nice and drunk, and when they finally fell asleep Kubinyi came to get us so we could escape. We walked and ran as fast as we could the entire night in the opposite direction.

After two or three days, we arrived in a big city, Balasgyarmat, where we could hear the booming of cannons. The Soviet military forces were very close and our liberation was imminent. All around us we heard the explosion of bombs. The people of the city were gathered 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 as the war noises came closer and closer.

At daybreak the noises subsided, and we awoke to the voices of soldiers speaking Russian. We carefully emerged from the cellar and realized that the town was being liberated, that the war was over. A group of Russian soldiers turned into the yard. They knew who we were because they saw our yellow armbands with the labor camp numbers, and they were very friendly to us. They went from house to house to look for German soldiers.

The Case of Zofia and Jakub Gargasz

The case of Zofia and Jakub Gargasz illustrates the German tendency to methodical neatness, and a meticulous clinging to written law and regulations without regard to their moral implications. They were discovered sheltering an aged Jewish woman in Brzezow, Poland, after she fled from a nearby ghetto. Let us follow the logic of the verdict by the learned court judges (two of whom sported Ph.D. titles), as it appears in official court minutes:

The defendant woman claims that as an Adventist, her religion forbids expelling a sick person from one’s home. This compelled her to keep the Jewess until she had

recovered. . . . [However], according to paragraph 1 of police regulations. . . , it was forbidden for the Jewess Katz to be found in Brzezow after December 1, 1942. . . . Therefore, the moment the defendant woman decided, in spite of this, to keep the Jewess in her home, she is guilty as charged (in accordance with paragraph 3/2 of above). . . . It is therefore necessary to impose on the defendant woman the only penalty which the law provides—the death penalty. As for the defendant’s husband, he too must bear this penalty, for the moment he discovered the Jewess in his home and did not expel her immediately but, on the contrary, together with his wife nursed the Jewess back to

health, he too is an accomplice to the act of sheltering her. . . . As the law allows only for the death penalty for extending aid to Jews, this too must be imposed on the husband. In accordance with paragraph 465 (St. Po.), the defendants must bear the court costs.

In this particular case, Nazi governor Hans Frank commuted the death penalty to life imprisonment, and the two defendants survived the concentration camps.

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Suddenly the streets were filled with people. From everywhere Hungarian soldiers and the forced-labor camp members came out of hiding. 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 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 honorable 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 labor camp men and those in civilian clothes were separated into one group, and 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 group in military uniforms, including Kubinyi, was taken to Russia.

Some of the men knew he had a wife and child living in Budapest. We took turns sending her packages of food, for life was hard for everyone after the war. These monthly packages went on for a year or more, and I remember that each time it was my turn she wrote me 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. At the same time, she wrote that she had received word from Russia that her husband had died in a labor camp in Siberia.

When my father first recounted these events almost 10 years ago, he was embarrassed and ashamed that he could not remember his commanding officer's name. "It was more than 40 years ago," I said, but that was little comfort to him. "But here is his picture," he said, pulling from his files an old envelope with the black-and-white photograph he had received decades earlier 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 before had we discussed in detail what had happened to my father during the Holocaust.

I turned to him with resolve. "We must find out his name. We must have him honored 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 labor camp friends might remember. Perhaps the one in New York or the other in Budapest. A few months later both wrote back. Unfortunately, neither could remember the name, but both sent their own recollections testifying to the officer's goodness. One also mentioned that he had written to another labor camp friend in Hungary. Perhaps he would remember. Several months later my father called to say he had received a letter that day. The commanding officer's name was Zoltán Kubinyi.

We quickly prepared the documentation and included the testimony of my father's friend Isaac Guttman as a required witness. 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

Morton and Ilona Fuchs at their 50th wedding anniversary (February 11, 1996).



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 receive for his altruistic, heroic, and self-sacrificing activities."

Over the years, we tried searching for 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 Kubinyi, Hitler's "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" was at least partly thwarted.

The last my father heard, 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. 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. Unfortunately, his mother had passed away a year or so before. The daughter-in-law said, "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 now to learn, nearly 50 years later, how much he means to others.

In February 1994, in a nationally televised ceremony in Budapest, Márton Kubinyi re-

ceived the Medallion of Honor on behalf of his father, posthumously honored 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.

In May 1994, at the 50th 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. More than 200 people gathered on the top floor of the Tokaj Synagogue, under reconstruction to be a cultural center, for what was the town's first Holocaust commemoration. Attending were Miki and Lajcsi, along with their families, the only Jews who remain in Tokaj. Born after the war, like my brother Henry and me, they are our childhood friends. Some of the survivors from the surrounding area came, but the majority 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 neighbors, who before the war had composed almost one-quarter of the town's population. Jews and non-Jews had lived side by side in harmony in Tokaj, a beautiful little town world-famous for its wines, and a pocket of sanity in a country that became fiercely anti-Semitic like its neighbors. Out of the 1,400 Jews in a town of 5,000, fewer than 100 survived the Holocaust. And most of these, like us, left in 1956. In the words of Tokaj's young mayor, János Májer, "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 among the most outstanding ones nationwide."

The program 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 have been so strange and foreign to them, particularly to the younger generation that hasn't grown up amidst the vibrant Jewish life that once flourished in their community.

When my turn to speak came, I couldn't keep the papers of my speech from shaking in my hands. Complete silence fell as I began to tell the story of the man who rescued some of the few Jewish men from this town who survived. When I said that Márton Gábor Kubinyi recently had received the commendations on behalf of his father, everyone burst into applause which spontaneously became rhythmic, indicating that he should stand up. From the front row, the mayor threw me a worried look. In all the frenzy of the preparations, no one had remembered to check to see if the son had even arrived for the commemoration. I finished the last line of my speech and, taking a chance, asked if Márton Kubinyi would please stand up. Far in the back a man's head slowly appeared, barely visible above the crowd.

I wanted 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." It would take

so long to get all the way back to him, yet I felt time and history pushing me to reach out for the goodness this man represented. I tried to soften the clicking of my heels as I moved across the concrete floor and to contain the feelings swirling within me. I could barely breathe. This was a moment in history—a punctuation of events that happened 50 years ago. The son's eyes, like mine, were filled with tears, and I thought, "Neither of us knew your father, but both our lives have been defined by him." We shook hands, and he leaned down and kissed mine in the age-old tradition of gentility. "I am happy to meet you. We will talk afterward, at the dinner," I said.

As we sat together later, my words in Hungarian came out haltingly as I tried to express my gratitude mixed with 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 had long wanted to ask him clamored in my head as I fought against my instinct to protect him and not intrude. Had he known anything of his father's story before he received my father's letter? How much had he already known from letters his mother received from the labor-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 from a few soldiers who came back from captivity in Russia, bringing with them his father's dog tags. But his mother never received official notification of his father's death. Only recently, after an appeal to the Hungarian government for some restitution, did they find out that his father had died of typhus. The Red Cross helped in obtaining the information and verification.

How did he feel when he received my father's letter and the documentation? I asked. "I cried right away," his wife answered. I thought about how mixed his emotions must have been. "He was very angry at times that he

Zoltan Kubinyi and his wife on the occasion of their engagement (November 1942).



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 14," his wife explained. "And his mother became quite fanatical, praying all the time for her husband's return. My husband has been a bus driver in Miskolc for many years. He has worked hard all his life. That's how he knows how to do everything, like all the building that we are doing on our house," his wife proudly stated. "And I do the letter writing he doesn't like to do," she added, chuckling.

Finally, I asked the crucial question that had 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 his feeling of honor as a military officer and a deeply religious man? Was it pride in having used 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? Was it principle above pragmatics? Did his fundamental respect for others, the honesty, integrity, and conviction that must have compelled him to act with such courage, transcend any consideration for himself and his family?"

The son answered, simply and with resigna-

tion, 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 honest, never lied. And to take it off would have been 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 and the repercussions they have had in our lives. Silently, the Kubinyis pulled out the certificate of commendation and the heavy silver medallion and placed them in front of me. As I started to pass them around to the others at the table, Mrs. Kubinyi 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.

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 comfort and inspiration, as it does for me. And it can give you hope for creating a better world to come."