

An Island of Heroes

by Judge Megan Goldish and Maria Augustus

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.
– Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner, author, Holocaust survivor, humanitarian

September, 1943: Maria's grandmother was barely ten years old. She lived on the Greek Island of Zakynthos, which was under the brutal occupation of the Nazis. The Nazis used to enter their homes and take their food or whatever items they wanted. The Nazis ordered the Zakynthians to turn over their valuables, their weapons, and, worst of all, the names of all the Jewish people on the Island. But the Zakynthians stayed united against the Nazis. They concealed their weapons and valuables. They hid their Jewish friends and neighbors in piles of hay, in barns, in boats, and in their homes—any place to keep them from being discovered. *Zakynthos is one of the only places in the world to protect its entire Jewish population during World War II.*

Maria's in-laws are also from Zakynthos. Her father-in-law and her grandmother remember that Zakynthians did not differentiate between Jewish and Christian Zakynthians. They lived together as friends and family. This *Yom HaShoah*, we should remember and be grateful for the courage of the people of Zakynthos, who did not stand idly by, but who stood up to evil.

For evil to flourish it only requires good men to do nothing.
– Simon Wiesenthal, Holocaust Survivor, Humanitarian

April 27, 2022, is *Yom Hashoah*, a day of commemoration of Jews and others murdered in the Holocaust. It is also a day to honor the heroes of the resistance. Nazis murdered six million Jews in the Holocaust, but that number would have been even higher had it not been for those who risked their own lives to save Jews. Often, people did not resist for fear of retribution or because Nazis provided incentives to those who affirmatively contributed to the annihilation of the Jews. This dynamic emphasizes the courage and heroism of those buried on the paths of the Garden of the Righteous Among Nations at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the Holocaust.

Don't let the ugly in others kill the beauty in you.
– Unknown

The Garden of the Righteous honors the heroic non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. It is the highest Israeli honor bestowed upon non-Jews, and the recipient also receives honorary citizenship. Two such heroic men are buried there: Loukas Karrer and Bishop Chrysostomos of the Greek island of Zakynthos.

Those who have courage and faith shall never perish in misery.
– Anne Frank

These men represent the unique bravery demonstrated by the people of Zakynthos—people who embody the spirit and heroism of those buried along the paths of the Garden of the Righteous.

Before the Holocaust, many Greek cities and islands housed thriving Jewish populations. After World War II, 90% of the Greek Jewish population had been eliminated by the Nazis and their collaborators. However, *100% of the Jewish population of Zakynthos survived.*

All men's souls are immortal, but the souls of the righteous are immortal and divine.
– Socrates, Greek philosopher of the 5th Century BCE

Zakynthos is known for its wonderful nightlife, beautiful scenery, and musical festivals. Something else that Zakynthos should be known for: that they stood up in the face of adversity, antisemitism, and laws making it criminal for them to help their Jewish friends and neighbors.

Good people do not need law to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the law.
– Plato, 5th century BCE Greek philosopher

In 1943, Nazis occupied Zakynthos. The Nazi commander stationed on Zakynthos, Paul Berenz, ordered the mayor, Louis Karrer, to provide the names of every Jewish resident of the island. It is believed that Mayor Karrer was ordered at gunpoint to release this information. Mayor Karrer knew that in other areas of Greece, Jews were being executed, or being sent to concentration camps. Mayor Karrer knew that if he revealed any Jewish names, he would be signing their death warrant. He was also cognizant that failure

to comply with this request could put he and his family, including his then-pregnant wife, at risk. Mayor Karrer consulted with the Bishop of the island, Chrysostomos. The mayor and the bishop refused Berenz's request.

Our purpose is defined as much by what we say no to as what we say yes to.

– Kristi Hedges, executive and author

The next day, Mayor Karrer and Bishop Chrysostomos appeared before Berenz, and again, they were ordered to provide a list of Jewish residents. Again, the mayor and the bishop refused to comply. Instead, in a courageous act of defiance, the mayor and the bishop handed a piece of paper to Berenz.

On that piece of paper only two names were written: Mayor Loukas Karrer and Bishop Chrysostomos. The bishop reportedly said, "Here are your Jews. If you choose to deport them, you must also take me, and I will share their fate." The bishop told Berenz that Jews had been living harmoniously alongside the Christian people of Zakynthos for centuries. Further, the bishop allegedly wrote a personal letter to Hitler, stating that all Jews of Zakynthos were under the bishop's personal authority. Berenz and his colleagues were stymied by the refusal of the mayor and the bishop to capitulate, and halted the order to reveal Jewish names.

At his best, man is the noblest of all animals; separated from law and justice, he is the worst.

– Aristotle, 5th century BCE Greek philosopher

Karrer and Chrysostomos alerted Jews on the island of imminent danger. Jews were instructed to hide with Christian families or in the mountains. Within a day, the entire Jewish population of Zakynthos went into hiding. The Germans were unable to locate any Jews, and not one of the 32,000 residents of the island turned in a Jewish person. The whole island knew where Jewish people could be found, yet not one person revealed their whereabouts. The Nazis later rescinded their request for the Jewish names. In October 1944, the Germans left Zakynthos.

I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.

– Alexander the Great, 4th Century BCE Greek conqueror

Recently, a documentary about the Jews of Zakynthos, *Life Will Smile*, was released. Hami Kantantini, a Holocaust survivor and native of Zakynthos, narrates it. He provided an eyewitness account of life on his island under Nazi occupation. He recalled how he and his family hid in the mountains, and that there were 13 people living in one room. Neighbors knew where Hami's family was being sheltered and, even as Nazis offered rewards for helping locate Jews, or threatened them with swift reprisals if they assisted Jews, nobody revealed Hami's location. He and his sister used to peek through the slats of the shutters of the house in which they hid, and often, they could see black shiny knee boots of Nazis as they walked around the paths. Hami's sister never wore shiny black knee-high boots in her lifetime because of this view.

Right is right even if no one is doing it; wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it.

– Saint Augustine, theologian and philosopher, 400 CE

The 32,000 inhabitants of Zakynthos saved all 276 Jewish souls. In reality, they saved more than just those 276 souls; rather, they saved generations of souls. To illustrate, Hami alone had a family of about 30 people, most of whom might not have existed but for the great people of Zakynthos. They are a living testament to the bravery of the people of this fine island.

Everybody, every human being, has the obligation to contribute somehow to this world.

– Edith Carter, Holocaust survivor

Many monuments and materials detailing this miraculous preservation of the entirety of the island's Jewry were destroyed in 1953 when a severe earthquake hit Zakynthos. Many Jews of Zakynthos later made aliyah, but they never forgot the bravery of its mayor and bishop. The first boat to arrive with aid for the victims of the 1953 earthquake was from Israel, with a message that read, "The Jews of Zakynthos have never forgotten their mayor or their beloved bishop and what they did for us." In an act of appreciation, the Jews of Zakynthos donated blocks of stone to repair the damage to the island's Saint Dionysius Church.

Great people never forget what others have done for them. In fact, having a sense of appreciation makes a person worthy of respect."

– Daisaku Ikeda, Buddhist philosopher

The people of Zakynthos are proud of this important part of their heritage, and that they stood together to protect humanity. They continue to teach this story to the next generations. The local high school still has field trips to its Jewish cemetery, and the story of the preservation of the Jewish community is part of the high school's curriculum.

“For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.”

– Elie Wiesel

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