

יום השואה והגבורה - YOM HASHOAH - HOLOCAUST DAY

Egon Gonda Redlich - a Maccabi leader in the Shoah

Dear friends,

In each annual Yom HaShoah that commemorates the victims and brave heroes of the largest and most brutal genocide in human history, we feel the same, tremendous paradox inherent in conveying without trivializing the *unimaginable size* and *depth of inhumane cruelty* of the Holocaust of the Jewish People in Europe during the Second World War? How to reconcile that slaughter of men, women, elderly and children - human beings exactly like us, with the same aspirations, dreams, desires, plans, fears, anxieties, joys and emotions - with that absolutely incomprehensible, inconceivable number, 6,000,000? One response to this excruciating dilemma developed by the School of Holocaust Teaching at Yad Vashem, is to *personalize the tragedy*: to learn details of the lives of those who suffered in the Holocaust and left their testimony to future generations.



Our Maccabi Movement has many examples of the extremities of suffering, martyrdom and heroism in the Holocaust. Commemorating Yom HaShoah in the past, we have written of Maccabi leaders like **Judith Deutsch**, **Fredy Hirsch**, and **Annaliese Borinski**. In commemoration of this Yom HaShoah, thanks to **Dr. Mario Sinai** and notes by **Brian Jaffe** of Maccabi Tzair Uruguay, we share with you today the story of **Egon Gonda Redlich** (Oct. 13, 1916 - Oct. 24, 1944), a Maccabi martyr who dedicated his life to Jewish-Zionist Maccabi education, and was murdered along with 150,000 deportees from Terezin¹ to the largest death factory, Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Egon Gonda Redlich was born in Olomouc, then capital of Moravia, part of Czechoslovakia that became a Nazi 'protectorate' after the invasion in 1939, months before the outbreak of the general Second World War in Europe. He was the fifth son of the Redlich family. Everyone called him by his nickname, **Gonda**. At home they spoke Czech. His father was a small businessman; Gonda was very close to his mother; throughout his life he was attached to the values he learned at home: striving, humility, and perseverance.

Gonda was a very good student and an excellent athlete. He excelled in the Humanities, and at athletics, swimming, skiing, tennis and table tennis. At 13 he began his lifelong involvement in Maccabi: **Maccabi Tzair** was a cornerstone of his Jewish-Zionist identity. At age 17, he began working as a madrich (youth counsellor), continued as a Rosh Gedud and Rosh Galil (general director). His lectures on Judaism and other topics were famous amongst and regularly-attended by *chanichim* (young members) of Maccabi. With his friend **Hans Slepter**, with whom Gonda had difficult political differences, he took upon himself the education of young Jewish refugees from Galicia.

¹ The infamously notorious 'Ghetto' Concentration Camp called Theresienstadt by the Nazis; besides the 150,000 deportees sent to Auschwitz, tens of thousands died there due to maltreatment, hunger and disease.

He began law studies in 1935, but these were interrupted by the arrival of the Nazi army in the Czech Sudetenland, March 15, 1939. The Zionist Youth Movements took responsibility for reorganizing the Jewish community of the "Protectorate" that Nazi Germany established in Czechoslovakia. Gonda, the outstanding Maccabi HaTzair leader - the largest and most successful Zionist Youth Movement in that region - began conducting clandestine activities from an apartment near Karel Square in Prague, including readings in English, French, German and Hebrew. When the "Youth Aliyah" school opened in the spring of 1939, Gonda became its Vice-Principal, and Hebrew and Jewish History teacher. Idealized and admired by all, Gonda taught 16-17 year-olds.

When the Germans closed the Jewish- Zionist youth movements and Jewish schools, Gonda volunteered with **Yacov Edelshtein** for the 'transport' from Prague to the Terezin fortress on Dec 4, 1941, thinking to establish a ghetto for Jews of the Protectorate and thereby avoid the deportation of Czech Jewry to Poland. Three exceptional **Maccabi Tzair madrichim** were part of the original Terezin Executive Committee: **Gonda, Fredy Hirsch** and **Fritz Frager**. In the ghetto, Gonda created and directed the Youth Department; **Fredy Hirsch**, a dedicated Maccabi leader idealized by youth in the Ghetto, was responsible for Building Management, and **Fritz Frager** led the Welfare Department.

Starting with the first 'transport' to Terezin, children were housed in a separate room in the women's block. Thanks to the intervention of Gonda and Fredy, the best rooms in the best blocks were allocated to children, housing around 2,300 children.

Thus, the first children's home was established in Terezin in Feb 1942. Gonda pulled together a picturesque young group to take care of them: educators, teachers, kindergarten teachers, psychologists, a pediatrician, and, above all, the madrichim of the youth movements. More children's homes were established, each with a special lifestyle and self-management. Each household had about 450 children, with boys and girls usually separated, teaching staff and madrichim, workshops, kitchens and in some cases, even an infirmary. There were 20-30 children in each room, deciding their own daily agenda and even working within the limitations of the appalling conditions in the ghetto.

Children over 14 were required to work. Classes for younger children were clandestine. Thanks to their counselors' support and attention, the children had a sense of family, despite sleeping on straw mattresses on triple-tier beds. They played, studied and were fed, celebrated birthdays and even had artistic performances. Older youth were concentrated in 4 separate buildings; they worked in agricultural gardens, carpentry, shoemaking and other professions. The 3 Maccabi leaders, Fredy, Fritz and Gonda, maintained their Jewish-Zionist educational commitment in all areas of action, caring for the physical and spiritual health of children and youth in Terezin.

Gonda's love, **Greta Beck**, arrived at Terezin on Sep 11, 1942, the Eve of Rosh Hashanah. 10

days later, they married. Their son Dan was born in Terezin. Gonda kept up his educational work with children and youth in Terezin, motivated by his Maccabi ideology and active leadership in the Hechalutz ('Pioneering') Zionist Youth Movements (in today's terminology, the Zionist HAGSHAMAH Movements) at that concentration camp, in itself a heroic act in such precarious living conditions, and at the same time taking loving care of his wife Greta and their son Dan.

The story of Gonda and his family came to a brutal end. As with most of the Jews in the Terezin "model camp", the Redlichs suffered the tragic fate of mass murder. Gonda Redlich, his wife Greta and their son Dan were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on Sep 7, 1944, and murdered shortly after their arrival at the death factory.

How do we know these details of Gonda's life? By a twist of fate: Egon *Gonda* Redlich kept a clandestine diary filled with his experiences, teachings, faith and beliefs, written between 1942 and 1944, and a second diary dedicated to his son Dan. In 1967 Czech workers found these diaries where he hid them. Ruth Bondi, the Hebrew editor of Gonda's diaries, pointed out that he wrote them in Hebrew six days a week (on Shabbat, he wrote in Czech). Although his Hebrew was far from perfect (due to the conditions in which he learned the language), he wanted to convey his Maccabi Zionist convictions by writing in Hebrew - a testament to the strength of his convictions and values, his legacy to future generations.

These are some poems and reflections in Gonda's Diaries²:

Terezin

*A white nightmare
of fireplaces burning blood
of the children of Judea
with awkward stars and faces of hunger.
Winter and Summer are the same:
behind barbed wire there are no seasons.*

*Terezin of children playing
while death is commonplace
painting blue sky
while dreaming of running around,
still believing in the sea,
and taken on a walk with no return.*

Terezin, Terezin, Terezin , a shattered ball.

*Thirsting for wonderful evenings
the high walls leapt crazily,
and love indestructible*



²10 Redlich, Egon, and Saul S. Friedman. The Terezin Diary of Gonda Redlich. Lexington, Ky., University of Kentucky Press, 1992.

was hanged on the fences of Terezin.

Terezin, Terezin, Terezin , shattered ball.

June 13, 1942

*Beloved, these days full of blood and sorrow,
are when a lonely man craves a kiss, like a child,
when man needs a caress.*

*Beloved, in these days man escapes into the night,
To his dreams and his photos hidden deep in his heart,
To his memories, his hopes for a better tomorrow.*

October 6, 1944 [last entry in the diary for Dan]

What is going to happen?

Tomorrow, we travel, my son. We will travel on a transport like thousands before us. As usual, we did not register for the transport. They put us in without a reason. But never mind, my son, it is nothing. All of our family already left in the last weeks. Your uncle went, your aunt, and also your beloved grandmother...

We hope to see her there.... They send small children, and their prams are left here. Separated families. On one transport a father goes. On another, a son. And on a third, the mother ...

Tomorrow we go, too, my son. Hopefully, the time of our redemption is near.

In an era when our People have an independent State and are completely sovereign over ourselves and our homeland, the deeply painful sense of utter impotence and desperation that overtook so many in the devastation of the Shoah is a ghost of the past, but it is an *ever-present* component of the horror with which we regard those times. In the act of honoring those men and women of whom the Nazis wanted to erase all memory, one of Hitler's most desired objectives, we retain their memories as a *living* presence and assume the enormous, almost overwhelming, but sacred responsibility to continue their legacies, paths, examples, and realizing by our actions, at least *some* of their hopes and aspirations.

***May the lives of the Six Million be always remembered,
blessed, honored and perpetuated by our deeds,
for we are their living memorial.***