



Adult Ed December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012

## The Death and Life of Hannah Senesh

### Preface: Hora to an Exiled Girl

When I chose these topics, I am often influenced by current events. In the case of Hannah Senesh, I had wanted to learn more about her life and works for a long time, but it was the discovery of a long-lost poem of hers that influenced the timing of this class.

In September of this year a poem written by Hannah Senesh and mailed to Hannah's friend and fellow member of Kibbutz Hatzor, Miriam Yasur, was discovered in a drawer<sup>1</sup>. The poem was written during the time that Hannah Senesh was being trained as a parachutist by the British prior to being dropped into Yugoslavia. Written in Hebrew, the poem entitled *Hora to an Exiled Girl* has been translated as follows:

*A hora, roaring, tempestuous, blazes around me  
With the mystery of rhythm, gladdening and forging,  
It tugs at my body and heart  
The foot marches, the back quivers, the song is ignited, a searing chorus  
Dance and song, a wordless prayer,  
Hail to the future, hail to creation*

*But then a figure flutters before my eyes  
My arm has escaped my friends' embrace  
My heart spurns the tempestuous singing,  
Far and near it consumes me whole*

*Blue eyes  
Such a bewildered glance  
A sad silence and a stubborn mouth  
The stillness grows in me  
I remain standing  
Alone, in a crowd of a hundred, her and I*

Although the hora as a dance is considered the foundation of Israeli folk dancing, similar dances are popular throughout Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, the dance is known as the Horo, while in Macedonia, Montenegro and among the gypsies, the dance is known as the Oro. Hannah Senesh used the dance as a metaphor to capture the image of something both captivating and bewildering.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/long-lost-hannah-szenes-poem-comes-to-light/>

## The Death: Where It Ends



On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944, at a prison outside of Budapest, Hungary, a young girl was brought before a firing squad. The popular version of the story tells us that she was offered a blindfold, but refused it. She wanted to face her executioners, and her fate, squarely. The shots rang out and the world lost the light of Hannah Senesh<sup>2</sup>.

Hannah's mother, Catherine Senesh, who would also become her biographer, was at that very moment trying to gain a pardon for her daughter. She would later go to the prison where she, as well as Hannah, had been kept. Outside the prison, she would be given the last effects of her daughter, including some poems and a diary that Hannah had kept, stuffed in the pockets of Hannah's dresses. One of Hannah's most famous poems was found in her cell after her death<sup>3</sup>:

*One - two - three... eight feet long  
Two strides across, the rest is dark...  
Life is a fleeting question mark  
One - two - three... maybe another week.  
Or the next month may still find me here,  
But death, I feel is very near.  
I could have been 23 next July  
I gambled on what mattered most, the dice were cast. I lost.*

In 1950, Hannah's body was recovered and brought back to Israel. For three days, Jews throughout Israel were given a chance to pay their respects to the young woman who had become a national heroine. Hannah's remains would be re-interred at the military cemetery on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Every death is tragic to someone. Certainly the death of a young woman, a child who dies before their parent, is a sad event. But among so many deaths during World War II, among so many young people killed during both combat and as civilians, among the deaths of the six million Jews killed during the Shoah, what was it about Hannah Senesh that made her so special?

In a poem that we at the JCS read as part of our Sabbath services Hannah wrote:

*There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth though they have long been extinct.  
There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living.  
These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark.  
They light the way for Mankind.*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/szenes.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah\\_Szenes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Szenes)

To understand why we mourn so deeply the passing of the light that Hannah Senesh brought with her, you need to understand how brightly she shone, to look back on and celebrate her life.

### **Budapest: Where It Begins**

Whenever we discuss history, I always encourage people to think about how we know what we think we know. In trying to understand Hannah Senesh's life, we have excellent document including Hannah's own diaries, which begin when Hannah is 13 and continue until she is 22; we have the written and video testimony of her mother, Catherine Senesh; the written and videotaped testimonies of fellow parachutists, who were on the same mission as Hannah. Prior to the war, the Senesh family was quite well-known in Budapest; there are abundant sources about what Hannah's early life was like.

Hannah's father, Bela Senesh, was a well-known playwright and journalist. As a child himself, he had contracted rheumatic fever which left him with a weak heart. He would often work late into the night, and then spend the mornings in bed. A devoted father, he would have Hannah and her brother, Gyuri, come into his bedroom for story times and to act out plays that the children, Hannah in particular, would write and perform. Although Bela would die when Hannah was only six years old, of a heart ailment, there is no question of the influence that he would have on his daughter's life.



The first entry in Hannah's diary, dated September 7, 1934, reads "This morning we visited Daddy's grave. How sad that we had to become acquainted with the cemetery so early in life. But I feel that even from beyond the grave Daddy is helping us, if in no other way than with his name. I don't think he could have left us a greater legacy."

Bela had bequeathed the family more than just his name and his love of writing. Hannah would grow up in a family that was well-off, if not prosperous, in a society that was accepting of Jews. In 1900, 20% of Budapest's total population and 40% of Budapest's voters were Jews<sup>4</sup>. By the 1930s, Jews comprised 30% of the population. Many were "Magyarized" having changed their last names to Hungarian sounding names (Bela Senesh had been born Bela Schlesinger<sup>5</sup>) and speaking fluent Hungarian. Anti-Semitic groups, including the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, the Nazis and even Hitler referred to the city as "Judapest."

When a Protestant school opened up near the Senesh home, Catherine sent Hannah there. Jewish students had to pay three times the standard tuition. (Catholic students only had to pay twice the standard rate.) But the Senesh family could afford the tuition.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judapest>

<sup>5</sup> *History Makers – Heroes of the Holocaust*, Susan Glick. Lucent Books, 2002.

Always a precocious child (she had been writing poetry since she was six, lovingly transcribed by her grandmother), Hannah would flourish in this environment. She was such a prodigy that the school would eventually agree to reduce her tuition to that paid by Catholic students.

In reading Hannah's diary, you cannot help but be struck by how ordinary her adolescence was for a woman who would become known as the "Jewish Joan of Arc." She writes about how she looks ("I'm glad I've grown lately. I'm now five feet tall and weigh 99 pounds. I don't think I'm considered a particularly pretty girl, but I hope I'll improve."); about boys ("Do boys interest me? Well, yes, they interest me more than before, but only in general because I didn't see a single boy I really liked the entire summer. True, I didn't meet very many. This is my idea of the ideal boy: he should be attractive and well dressed, but not a fop; he should be a good sportsman, but interested in other things besides sports; he should be cultured and intelligent, but good-humored and not arrogant; and he should not chase after girls. And so far I have not met a single boy like this."); and about school.

But she also is writing poems and plays. This is a poem Hannah writes at age 13:

*Life is a brief and hurtling day, pain and striving fill every page.  
Just time enough to glance around,  
Register a face or sound  
and—life's been around.*

Her April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1936 entry reads:

*Today was my first opening. My play is called Bella Gerant Alii, Tu, Felix Austria, Nube. We performed it for Aunt B. I wrote and directed it, and it was really an awful lot of work. But I don't feel Aunt B. is capable of properly assessing its worth. They say the play is quite good, but certainly not good enough to lead to anything.*

The title translates to "What others gain in battle, Austria gains in wedlock" and refers to the Hapsburg rulers of Austria marrying for political gain rather than love. The Aunt B. referred to is a teacher, all teachers being called Aunt or Uncle. Modesty aside, it is clear that Hannah is a prodigy. Had circumstances and history not conspired otherwise, Hannah might have been content to pursue a literary career. But in 1937, Hannah is elected secretary of the Literary Society at school; then immediately denied the position because Jews are not allowed to hold offices. She writes:

*Only now am I beginning to see what it really means to be a Jew in a Christian society. But I don't mind at all. It is because we have to struggle, because it is more difficult for us to reach our goal that we develop outstanding qualities. Had I been born a Christian, every profession would be open to me. I would become a teacher, and that would be the end of it. As it is, perhaps I'll succeed in getting into the profession for which, according to my abilities, I am best suited.*

It is ironic, but Hannah was talking about a career in the hotel industry. The school's refusal to allow Hannah to hold office is symptomatic of other changes that are taking place in Hungarian society.

## The Rise of the Arrow Cross

To understand how and why Hungary would go from being a country of tolerance to anti-Semitism, we need to look at its recent history.

After World War I, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy collapsed. There followed a period of political chaos and fragmentation<sup>6</sup>. The French landed an army in Greece that armed the Romanian and Serbian states, formerly parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These states, along with the newly formed Czechoslovakia, attacked Hungary. At the same time, there was internal strife, with the Prime Minister being assassinated by soldiers during what was called the Aster Revolution. A leftist liberal, Count Mihály Károlyi, became Prime Minister and soon the Hungarian King, Charles I, would step aside. In an attempt to broker a peace, Károlyi would order the Hungarian army to disband. As a peace effort, this was a huge failure and the Czech forces would seize northern territories, while the Romanians would annex the eastern (Transylvanian) parts of the country. Károlyi would sign off on even more territorial concessions and then resign.

The Károlyi government would be replaced by a Communist government, run by Bela Kun, who was Jewish. Many other members of this government were also Jewish. The Kun government was able to raise a volunteer army and had some initial successes, particularly against the Czech forces. But Kun counted on support from the Soviet Army; this never materialized. Kun would give back all of the lands that he had recaptured and the army, demoralized, would disband. The Romanian Army would advance; Kun and his advisors would grab art treasures and the gold stocks from the National Bank, and flee. The Romanians would take the city of Budapest. A new fighting force would arise, the Conservative Royalists or the “Whites.” They were commanded by Miklos Horthy, the former commander of the Austro-Hungarian Navy. Eventually, the Romanian army would finish looting the country and would leave and Horthy would restore stability, but first would come the White Terror, characterized by the torture and execution of suspected Communists and by pogroms against the Jews.

While Hungary had a history of tolerance and acceptance of its Jewish population, the blame attached to the Kun government and the association of Jews with Communism would have a terrible legacy. In the 1920s, a pro-German Hungarian extremist, Gyula Gombos, would coin the term National Socialism. In 1935, Ferenc Szalasi would found the Party of National Will<sup>7</sup>. The party’s ideology was similar to Nazism: anti-capitalism, anticommunism and militant anti-Semitism. The party would be outlawed in 1937, but re-emerge as the Arrow Cross Party in 1939. The crossed arrows, one horizontal and one vertical, form a symbol intended to mimic the Swastika. The rise of these Fascist parties, along with Hungary’s desire to appease Nazi Germany, would have dramatic impact on the Senesh family.



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<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Hungary#Between\\_the\\_two\\_world\\_wars\\_.281918.E2.80.931941.29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Hungary#Between_the_two_world_wars_.281918.E2.80.931941.29)

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow\\_Cross\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow_Cross_Party)

In 1938, the First Jewish Law was passed in Hungary, restricting the number of Jews permitted in certain professions (law, medicine, administration, commercial and industrial enterprises) to 20%<sup>8</sup>. The term “Jew” not only applied to those who actively were practicing the religion, but also to those who had converted after 1919 or who had been born to Jewish parents after that date. Hannah being barred from being secretary of the Literary Society is almost a pre-cursor to what would happen in Hungarian society. In 1939, Hungary would pass the Second Jewish Law. Being a Jew was defined on a racial basis, to include 100,000 apostate Christians and their children, and reduced the percentages allowed in those professions to 5%. Approximately 250,000 Jews had just lost their livelihoods. Jews also lost their political rights.

Most Jews viewed these measures as temporary and responded by expressing their patriotic attachment to Hungary. Social aid societies stepped up to help the unemployed. Other members of the Jewish community turned to Zionism, to carving out a Jewish homeland in Eretz Yisrael.

### **“I’ve Become a Zionist”**

The changing political climate in Hungary was affecting Hannah’s life, even in ways that we would not think. For example, Hannah wrote about correspondence that she had had with a boy named Bela, who had been attracted to Hannah:

*When the first Jewish Bill was introduced I received a letter from him in which he wrote that now he understood why I was so reserved: I must have thought that he, a Gentile, would be disturbed by the fact I am Jewish, whereas, etc., etc. When I read this I instantly sat down and replied that evidently he could not believe a Jewish girl still had pride and self-respect. I told him that if he felt I was an “exception to the rule” (that Jews are inferior), I did not want to be considered as such (exceptional) and to please remember that he can safely include Jews among those about whom he can safely say something good.*

Of course, it was not just the events within Hungary that were on people’s minds. Hannah’s entry of September 17, 1938:

*We’re living through indescribably tense days. The question is, Will there be war? The mobilization going on in various countries doesn’t fill one with a great deal of confidence. No recent news concerning the discussions of Hitler and Chamberlain. The entire world is united in fearful suspense. I, for one, feel a numbing indifference because of all this waiting. The situation changes from minute to minute. Even the idea there may be war is abominable enough.*

It would take a year (September 1939) for the war that Hannah feared to break out in full measure, but confronted by increasing anti-Semitism within Hungary and the threat of war with Hitler’s Germany, Hannah made a decision:

*Oct. 27, 1938 - I don’t know whether I’ve already mentioned that I’ve become a Zionist. This word stands for a tremendous number of things. To me it means, in short, that I now consciously and strongly feel I am a Jew, and am proud of it. My primary aim is to go to Palestine, to work for it. Of course this did not develop from one day to the next; it was a somewhat gradual*

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.geschichteinchronologie.ch/eu/ungarn/EncJud\\_juden-in-Ungarn02-1919-bis-1939-ENGL.html](http://www.geschichteinchronologie.ch/eu/ungarn/EncJud_juden-in-Ungarn02-1919-bis-1939-ENGL.html)

*development. There was first talk of it about three years ago, and at that time I vehemently attacked the Zionist Movement. Since then people, events, times have all brought me closer to the idea, and I am immeasurably happy that I've found this ideal, that I now feel firm ground under my feet and can see a definite goal toward which it is really worth striving. I am going to start learning Hebrew, and I'll attend one of the youth groups. In short, I'm really going to knuckle down properly. I've become a different person, and it's a very good feeling. One needs something to believe in, something for which one can have whole-hearted enthusiasm. One needs to feel that one's life has meaning, that one is needed in this world. Zionism fulfills all this for me. One hears a good many arguments against the Movement, but this doesn't matter. I believe in it, and that's the important thing. I'm convinced Zionism is Jewry's solution to its problems and that the outstanding work being done in Palestine is not in vain.*

Hannah did not do things in half measures; once she had embraced Zionism, she set her sights on leaving for Israel, which was still the British Mandate for Palestine. For a long time, Hannah did not share this decision with her mother. Hannah's brother, Gyuri, had been denied the opportunity to attend university in Hungary and had gone off to France. Once Hannah left, her mother would be alone in an increasingly dangerous country. How did her mother react? We have the words of Catherine herself:

*Until the age of seventeen Hannah fully enjoyed the delights, pleasures, and amusements of youth, but then her diary reveals a radical change of direction in her life. We had lost our Fini Mama only a year before. Gyuri had gone to France to continue his education instead of to Vienna, as originally planned, because Austria had surrendered to Hitler. We didn't discuss it, but it seemed unlikely that Gyuri would ever return. Hannah knew how upset I was by these partings. Only gradually, over a period of months, did she acquaint me with her plans to emigrate to Palestine. At first I was strongly opposed to her decision, but her many intelligent and convincing arguments weakened my objections. Once she said that even if she had not happened to be born a Jew she would still be on the side of the Jews because one must help, by all possible means, a people who were being treated so unjustly now, and who had been abused so miserably throughout history. On another occasion, when I asked what had become of her ambition to be a professional writer (considering one had but one mother tongue), she answered, "that question is dwarfed by present burning problems." Finally she tackled me with this statement: "Mother, if you don't agree to my going, of course I won't go. But I want you to know I feel miserable in this environment and don't wish to live in it."*



On July 17, 1939, Hannah turned 18 years old. On July, 21, 1939, she would receive the certificate that would allow her to go to Palestine. By September, she would write from aboard a ship en route to her new home. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, she would pose for this picture standing in Haifa. For Hannah, arriving in Eretz Yisrael was coming home.

### **In Israel**

I am going to gloss over this part of Hannah's life. Her time in Israel (or Palestine) spanned 1939 through 1943. I will only briefly cover those years.

First, Hannah was a brilliant student, an accomplished poet and fledgling playwright. She could have gained admittance to a university in Israel easily enough. Instead, she chose to be part of the farming movement. From her mother Catherine's notes:

*When I brought up the most disputed question between us—that if she must go to Palestine, why to agricultural school, why not to the university, where, according to her talents and capabilities, she actually belonged, and where she would certainly prove more useful and productive than in something so completely alien to her as farm work—I received an answer that had, by then, become customary: “there are already far too many intellectuals in Palestine; the great need is for workers who can help build the country. Who can do the work if not we, the youth?”*

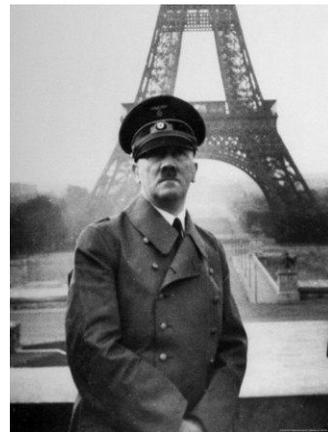
Reading from Hannah's diary, she never regretted her decision. This girl from a prosperous household in Budapest, a girl who had grown up with servants, embraced every task. She found joy in planting and harvesting under the hot Middle Eastern sun; she found the system of pulleys used to move the manure that she shoveled out of the barns to be fascinating; in particular, Hannah took pleasure in raising chickens.

Hannah loved traveling throughout her new homeland. Along with other kibbutzniks, Hannah would hitchhike from place to place. She visited Tel Aviv, traveled through the country, and visited a number of kibbutzim. In 1941, she would join Kibbutz Sdot Yam. She would write of the decision:

*I am tormented by grave doubts concerning my work. I stand on my feet nine hours daily, washing clothes. And I ask myself, is this purpose in life? I'm willing to do this kind of work but feel my potential is wasted, and this is extremely depressing. While this may be purely a period of transition, still, it's been nearly three years since I arrived in the Land—the most fruitful years of development, of study, important years in the school of life, decisive years. Did I achieve everything I could and should have? This is not just my personal worry. It is also that of tens of thousands of young Jews. But each must fight his own battle. Certainly by choosing Sdot Yam I picked one of the most difficult kibbutzim, both socially and economically. At the same time, I feel it's a worthwhile project, and I have every intention of devoting my best possible efforts and abilities to this settlement. I hope I succeed.*

While Hannah was busy making a place for herself in her new land, the war was never far from her thoughts. She worried about her brother, still in France, when Germany attacked in May of 1940. France was overwhelmed and the Germans would enter Paris on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

At the same time, Hannah was worried about her mother. Hungary had been spared the worst of the fighting. Because of its history, Hungary was considered pro-Fascist and pro-Nazi and was viewed as an ally. Although Hungary sought to avoid a direct involvement, in 1940 it would bow to pressure from Germany and join the Axis. In 1941, Hungarian forces would join in the invasion of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. At the same time,



however, Hungary would engage in secret negotiations with the United States and Great Britain. Nothing would come of these talks and Hitler would discover this attempted betrayal and invade Hungary at a most inauspicious moment, in March of 1944.



Italy, under Mussolini, would also enter the war. Beginning in July of 1940, Italian planes would bomb Tel Aviv, Haifa, Acre and Jaffa. These bombings, directed at Palestine as a British Protectorate (that it was the new Jewish homeland seemed to be a bonus) struck Hannah deeply. In May on 1942, Hannah was accepted into the Palmach, the commando branch of the Haganah.

Hannah's thoughts during this time are very much about her family, her mother in particular. She dreams of returning to Hungary, of organizing Jewish youth emigration and of getting her mother out. In an almost eerie instance of foreshadowing, Hannah's diary of February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1943 reads:

*How strangely things work out. On January 8 I wrote a few words about the sudden idea that struck me. A few days ago a man from Kibbutz Ma'agan, a member of the Palmach, visited the kibbutz, and we chatted awhile. In the course of the conversation he told me that a Palmach unit was being organized to do—exactly what I felt then I wanted to do. I was truly astounded. The identical idea! My answer, of course, was that I'm absolutely ready. It's still only in the planning stage, but he promised to bring the matter up before the enlistment committee, since he considers me admirably suited for the mission.*

As with so many things in her life, when Hannah makes up her mind about something, she makes it happen. There are increasingly large gaps in her diary, so that there is a gap between October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1943 (an entry that deals in large measure with a new kibbutz member named Eli, who after only two weeks declares his love for Hannah) and the January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944 entry that begins:

*This week I leave for Egypt. I'm a soldier. Concerning the circumstances of my enlistment, and my feelings in connection with it, and with all that led up to it, I don't want to write. I want to believe that what I've done, and will do, are right. Time will tell the rest.*

Some final notes about Hannah's time in Israel. She made few deep friendships (a woman named Miryam stands out as one of Hannah's close friends) but Hannah never does find love. She meets many boys and some men who find her attractive; of that number, she in turn finds a few attractive. But it never feels right for Hannah.

Hannah, along with dozens of other Jews, is chosen to participate in a mission that will send them into German-occupied Europe. Hannah must enlist in the British Army (if they did not have military status and wear uniforms, they could be executed as spies) and receive training in British-held Cairo.



The day before Hannah leaves, her brother Gyuri arrives in Israel. They have one day together. A picture of them is taken in Tel Aviv.

### **The Mission**

The goals of the mission were twofold: Primarily, to make contact with Yugoslavian and eventually Hungarian partisans to rescue downed British aviators and then, secondarily, to rescue the Jews of Hungary<sup>9</sup>. Thirty-seven paratroopers were sent in.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-600-0283A-12A  
Foto: Faupel | Oktober 1944

The mission was basically doomed before it started. The parachutists landed in Yugoslavia in mid-March 1944. At almost the exact same time, the Germans, having become aware of the secret negotiations being conducted by Hungary, invaded. They were supported by the Arrow Cross. Miklos Horthy, the Regent, was placed under house arrest. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Miklos Kallay, was also replaced.

Up to this point, the Jews of Hungary had endured political and economic repression, but had largely (and this is especially true for the Jews in Budapest) been protected from the Final Solution. That was about to change.<sup>10</sup>

Within months of the German invasion, mass deportations to the death camps began. Eichmann himself was sent to Hungary and between May of 1944 and July, over 400,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz for immediate extermination. One in three Jews killed in Auschwitz was a Hungarian citizen. It is also worth noting that it was the Jews of Hungary that Raul Wallenberg was saving.

The gentiles of Hungary would also suffer terribly. Forced allies of the Germans, the Hungarian Second Army had been sent to fight at Stalingrad in 1943. Crushed by the Soviets, they ignored German orders to stand and fight and instead fled towards home. Harassed by both Soviet air strikes and partisans, and ill-prepared for the Russian winter, more than 100,000 would perish, with most of the survivors captured by the Soviet forces. By September of 1944, the Soviets were at the border of Hungary and a new army had been raised, determined to fight for their homeland. They were ill-equipped and poorly trained. Horthy tried to sign an armistice with the Soviet Union, the army ignored it and continued fighting, the Germans discovered the peace efforts and kidnapped

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<sup>9</sup> *History Makers – Heroes of the Holocaust*, Susan Glick. Lucent Books, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungary\\_during\\_World\\_War\\_II#The\\_war\\_comes\\_to\\_Hungary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungary_during_World_War_II#The_war_comes_to_Hungary)

Horthy's son and used him as leverage and the war continued. For a time the Hungarian government forbade deportations, giving the Jews of Budapest a respite, then the Arrow Cross launched a reign of terror. It is into this chaos that Hannah Senesh is returning home.

We learn about Hannah's time on the mission from the statement of Reuven Dafne, a fellow member of the group, also from Palestine:

*I had the privilege of serving with Hannah during World War II, slogging through the land of the Yugoslav partisans for months until the terrible day she crossed the Hungarian border and fell into Nazi hands. I first met Hannah when the paratroopers convened to plan their mission. I was a soldier at the time, and because I knew Yugoslavia well I was invited to talk to them, advise them, tell them where I thought it best for them to land in order to avoid capture. During my sessions with the group, a girl—the only girl in it—attracted my attention by her alert participation. It didn't occur to me at first that she was one of the paratroopers; I assumed that she, too, had been called in to give information about one of the countries the mission was heading for. Several weeks later we met again in Cairo, and Hannah implored me to join the group. I distinctly remember how much she impressed me. I still didn't know her well, nor did I understand what motivated her. She was happy, cheerful, joked with all of us, including our Arab driver, yet never took her mind off the mission. Her changes of mood astounded me. One moment she would be rolling with laughter, the next aflame with fervor. I felt that a kind of divine spark must be burning in the depths of her being.*

While in Yugoslavia, Hannah learns of the German invasion. According to Reuven Hannah's response is dramatic:

*It was catastrophic news for all of us—and it was the first time I saw Hannah cry. I thought she was crying solely because of her mother, whom I knew she adored, and to whom certainly anything could happen now. But amidst her sobs she exclaimed, "What will happen to all of them ... to the million Jews in Hungary? They're in German hands now—and we're sitting here ... just sitting."*

Despite her feelings, Hannah is not able to cross over immediately. Hannah and Reuven continue to work with the partisans. They travel, are caught in fire-fights, eventually Hannah is able to cross the border in Hungary. Before she does, she will hand Reuven the poem that is perhaps her most famous work:

*Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame  
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart  
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honour's sake  
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.*

In his filmed account, Reuven says that he initially threw the piece of paper that Hannah handed him away without looking at it. Only later would he regret his decision, turn back and scour the forest until he found the poem.

## The Capture

Hannah crosses the border crosses the border and almost immediately disaster ensues. Two of her companions from Palestine will cross later, Yoel Palgi and Peretz Goldstein. Peretz will be killed before the end of the war, but Yoel will survive and write an account of what happened to Hannah next:

*We had already known that the border runners were in everyone's employ, including the Germans', and could no longer be trusted. Then one day Hannah came across a group of refugees who had escaped from Hungary. Among them were three young men who were willing to join the rescue mission—a non-Jewish Frenchman and two Jews who had been planning to reach Palestine. All three agreed to go back into Hungary with Hannah. The four set out, and although the area was unknown to them they nevertheless decided to cross into thickly patrolled enemy territory, a map and a compass as their only guide. I still don't understand how, in the circumstances, they managed to reach their goal—a Hungarian village—without encountering German patrols. But somehow they did. Hannah and the Frenchman hid among some bushes on its outskirts, while the other two went into the village to contact friends who had permits to travel to the capital. The police stopped them. Instead of trying to bluff their way through, or using their guns against the few policemen, one of the boys shot himself instead. Then farmers told the police that the men had been accompanied by another two partisans whom they had seen hiding in the bushes. The next thing they knew, Hannah and her companion were surrounded by soldiers. She suffered dreadful tortures that she wouldn't talk about, but her missing tooth provided mute testimony. I heard from others how they had tied her, how they had whipped her palms and the soles of her feet, bound her and forced her to sit motionless for hours on end, beaten her all over the body until she was black and blue. They asked her one thing, only one thing: what is your radio code? Yes, the code was important to them, for they had found the transmitter she hid just before she was caught—and now they wanted to use it to send out false information, to mislead bomber squadrons so that they could be greeted by fighters and anti-aircraft guns. Hannah didn't reveal it. When she was being transferred to Budapest she tried to kill herself by jumping from the window of the train, because she didn't know how long she could hold out. But she was caught in the act and beaten even more. "You don't have the right to destroy yourself," her guard told her. "You are state property; we'll do away with you when we no longer need you, not before." But her most awful test was yet to come. They brought her to Budapest and there, to her horror, she found her beloved mother. She hugged her and could find only the words: "Forgive me, Mother, I had to do what I did."*

When torture failed to break Hannah, her mother is arrested and kept in the same prison. At first, the Hungarian authorities and the Nazis threaten to kill Catherine, but Hannah still refuses to talk. Then Hannah is kept in solitary, while her mother is confined nearby. As in prisons everywhere, the inmates find ways to get around security. Hannah first draws a Magen David in the dirt on the window of her cell. Among the prisoners that see this are the women in the cell where her mother is being held. Hannah later gets hold of a

mirror and uses that to flash signals. Getting pieces of paper, she will cut out letters to show messages. During the time that Hannah is taken out for interrogations and brought back, she hears news of the world and her communications becomes the source of news for the prison.

Hannah is allowed to walk in the exercise yard and is able to carry on whispered conversations with other prisoners, even with her mother on some occasions. The war is ending, the Soviet forces are close and the prisoners are hopeful. In July of 1944, word comes of the assassination attempt of Hitler. Even though the attempt fails, if German officers are trying to kill Hitler, then things must be drawing to a close. Catherine Senesh is released and, at great risk to her own life, begins to lobby for Hannah's release. It is the closeness to the end of the war, the imminence of relief at that make the next events so tragic. Turning again to the words of Yoel Palgi:

*The days that followed were difficult. We heard continually about the progress of the Red Army and of its powerful attacks, but no one knew exactly what the situation was. Confusion reigned. The judges who had tried Hannah fled the country, so there was no one left to try Peretz and me. Prison boilers became pyres for court records that had been kept since the beginning of the war. The thunder of the artillery increased hourly, rattling the windowpanes. Then came the news that Conti Street Prison had been evacuated and that Hannah was among the last prisoners transferred to Margit Boulevard Prison, where I was. We had two fervent wishes: that they would not move us before the Russians arrived, and that they would bring us food. We suffered desperately from hunger. Because of the frequent bombardments we were sometimes given soup only once a day, and in the penetrating cold of late autumn we trembled with hunger and increasing weakness. It sometimes seemed that even if we were lucky enough not to be moved, we would starve to death before the Red Army broke through. November 7 was a dark, cloudy day. We sat around quietly, leaning against the wall, huddled together in an effort to conserve the little body heat we had. Suddenly we heard shots. We looked at each other, frightened and bewildered. What had happened? Had someone been executed? Impossible! This was not their method. Last respects were always paid. There was always the marching of the firing squad, the reading of the sentence, prayer and a bugle call accompanying the dark moment of execution in the gray courtyard beneath our cell window. Someone climbed up to the high window and, looking down, informed us that he could see a table with a crucifix on it, but no sign of an execution. At the same moment we heard voices in the courtyard—an order to rearrange the straw. Apparently a guard had fired a bullet by accident, and the reverberation had amplified the sound. That afternoon one of our cellmates went to the doctor. Every day one of us would go for treatment or a pill because the clinic served as a center of information and communication. The return of that "patient" was the most important event of our day.*

*That afternoon we waited even more eagerly than usual for our cellmate's return. He was back within half an hour, pale and shaken, as if he really were ill. He leaned against the wall for support, removed his hat, and announced in a faint voice, "they've executed Hannah." We were stunned. Hannah? Executed? No! Impossible! Why Hannah? Why not*

us? "It's a mistake ... a mistake...." After the first wave of shock I was sure my cellmate had misunderstood. I mumbled over and over again, "It's a mistake ... a mistake ... a mistake...." until the Frenchman imprisoned with me at the time gripped my hand and whispered, "Calm down, control yourself."

While her mother was seeking audience with the office in charge, Captain Simon, Simon was presiding over Hannah's execution. A prisoner who served as an orderly offered this account:

*Simon began tonelessly: "Hannah Senesh, you have been sentenced to death. Do you wish to ask for clemency?" "Sentenced to death? No, I wish to appeal. Bring in my lawyer." "You cannot appeal. You may ask for clemency." "I was tried before a lower tribunal. I know I have the right to appeal." "There are no appeals. I repeat: Do you or do you not wish to ask for clemency?" "Clemency—from you? Do you think I'm going to plead with hangmen and murderers? I shall never ask you for mercy." "In that case, prepare to die! You may write farewell letters. But hurry. We shall carry out the sentence in one hour from now."*

After her death, Captain Simon told the Seneshes' solicitor, "Hannah Senesh remained rebellious till her last day. About to die, she revealed that evil purposes had directed her steps. She wrote to her comrades: 'Continue on the way; don't be deterred. Continue the struggle till the end, until the day of liberty comes, the day of victory for our people.'"

### **Epilogue: The Shoes At The Danube**

Hannah would be buried in the Martyrs' Section of Budapest's Jewish cemetery. No one knows who brought her body there (Jews were not allowed to leave their houses) or who was at her funeral. In 1950, her body would be moved to Israel.

Catherine Senesh was sent to a death camp, however she escaped and would make her way to Israel. Through the help of a "righteous gentile" she was able to preserve Hannah's legacy:

*At Conti Street Prison I was given a few of Hannah's personal effects. In the pockets of the dresses I found two scraps of paper. On one was a poem she must have written in her cell in Hadik Barracks after our last meeting, and a few undated lines of farewell:*

*Dearest Mother: I don't know what to say—only this: a million thanks, and forgive me, if you can. You know so well why words aren't necessary. With love forever, Your daughter*

The poem was 1-2-3; Hannah's recognition of her impending death.



Hannah Senesh was, of course, not the only victim of the senseless violence at the end of the war. On the night of January 8, 1945, an Arrow Cross execution brigade forced the Jewish inhabitants of a building on Vadasz Street to the banks of the Danube. They were forced to line up by the side of the river, told to take off their shoes and were shot or forced into the river. In memoriam, an exhibit was created by Gyula Pauer and Can Togay. “Sixty pairs of cast iron shoes, cast in the styles of the 40's, stand in remembrance of the people shot into the Danube during the Arrow Cross terror.”<sup>11</sup>

What made Hannah so special? It was her driving will and her indomitable spirit; her brilliance and writing ability; all of these things of course. But Hannah was able to capture the spirit of

her generation of Jews, of a people that had been beaten down and subjected to injustice, but who remained unbowed.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shoes\\_Danube\\_Promenade\\_IMG1297.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shoes_Danube_Promenade_IMG1297.jpg)

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