

THE STORY OF DR. JOSEF JAKSY

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The pages that follow tell the story of a remarkable man, Dr. Josef Jaksy, a physician who lived in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia during the Nazi occupation and who risked his life to save Jews, Czech partisans and Allied pilots. He used his stature and position as a distinguished surgeon and professor of urology, his money and his relationships to go beyond what was required of him by the Oath of Hippocrates, while at the same time Nazi physicians were using their medical knowledge to commit atrocities and perfect extermination. His is a story of moral courage, of unassuming and unshakable humanity, of goodness in the face of unspeakable evil.

"Civilization is based on certain moral values, all of which are attacked and called into question by the Holocaust. But let us not forget that the bottom line doesn't rest with Hitler, but with those who quietly did what everyone should have done. Those who risked their lives to save their neighbors act as mirrors for us all, reflecting our own humanity back to us"

- Dr. Mordecai Paldiel, Director,  
Righteous Among the Nations  
Yad Vashem of Jerusalem.

Affidavit:

"There appeared before me, a Dr. Josef Jaksy, as decreed by the 3rd Restitution Chamber of the "Landes" Court, Duesseldorf, on March 1, 1967...the witness, Dr. Josef Jaksy was informed of his right to refuse testimony in accordance with... applicable statutes and regulations... He declared that he wanted to testify. After having informed the witness about the significance... of his oath both under the laws of the German Federal Republic and the State of New York,..he answered to questions as follows:

1. ' My name is Jaksy, my first name is Josef, my age is 66, my profession is practicing physician...,New York City, N.Y.
2. I first met the plaintiff in the beginning of World War II, about 1940, in Bratislava, (Pressburg), Slovakia. I then saw her several times during the years 1941, 1942 and 1943, possibly also 1944. After that I

have never seen her again. I am not related to the plaintiff either directly or by marriage....

3. Because of her Jewish descent, the plaintiff, together with several other persecuted persons, was in a hiding place in Bratislava. I want to declare the following: I am a Christian and was not persecuted by the Germans because of race. However, I belonged to the Underground movement and have treated many hidden Jews in Bratislava. At that time I was the Chief of the Urological Clinic at the Slovak University of Bratislava. I even hid Jews in the clinic. I can assert that I have saved the life of many Jews. Thus I also treated Livia Klein during these years as well as could be managed.

4. The hiding place was wet, cold, unhygienic in the extreme and difficult to endure. A horse stable would be a palace in comparison. Due to these conditions the plaintiff suffered primarily from infections of the respiratory organs and passages. In addition she contracted a serious kidney infection. I brought her my own medications from the clinic. Naturally, it was impossible to provide the customary therapy. Merely the trip to the hiding place meant risking the life of all participants. Bratislava was headquarters for the German Secret State Police for the entire Balkans. It was therefore by nature extremely dangerous to comply with a request to go there. One also had to be on guard for spies and agents.

5. It is clear to me that these infections and inflammations suffered by the patient for years caused serious consequences for her entire life. It is my opinion permanent damage has resulted.'

Fritz Winschenk, Attorney"

I'd like to describe Dr. Jaksy. At age 90, he is appealing in his courtly, quietly warm manner and in his good looks, despite the effects of Parkinson's Disease. Although his physical state is weakened, he greets with a hearty handshake and a face lit with warmth and friendliness. I had imagined that in his younger years he had reddish-blond hair that matched his healthy -looking, ruddy face and once-strong body. His character's depth is conveyed through a dignified, reserved and gentle manner, wisdom and humor. His accent and way of speaking was familiar to me, for he had come from where my family did: Czechoslovakia.

For years we met in our building's elevator or lobby; I had always wanted to get to know him and his wife, Elizabeth, a Viennese -born biologist and pianist. One day, Mrs. Jaksy asked if she could give me a set of her house keys so that in the event her husband fell while she was out, I would be notified by the Red Cross who would be alerted by a special beeper he wore.

Our friendship developed in the weeks that followed, and I asked him what it was like to have lived in Czechoslovakia under the Nazi occupation. I was not prepared for the story that was to unfold, a story of a physician-healer and humanitarian who repeatedly endangered his life to save others' from the darkness and evil of the Holocaust.

He had never told his story to anyone, and he did not at first want me to tell it. He felt that what he did was ordinary; to tell others seemed unfitting. His deep compassion and moral courage were extraordinary examples of humanity at its best; in my view he warranted the highest recognition.

Over a period of two years I spent hundreds of hours talking with Dr. Jaksy and recording his story. He found meaning in telling me the events of his life and he agreed that it would be important for it to be told to others. With very little information to start with, I began the search for survivors and other witnesses because the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, whom I had contacted, had replied that independent corroboration would have to be produced in order for him to be honored. That was to come about in an unusual and unforeseen way.

An old envelope with a faded address led me to Canada, to the family of a Dr. Koch, a physician who had been a close friend of Dr. Jaksy and who himself had been honored by Yad Vashem. With that information, I suggested to Yad Vashem's Dr. Paldiel that Dr. Koch's file might contain something about Dr. Jaksy. It did. It contained testimony by a Mr. Alexander Ekstein documenting Dr. Koch's deeds and, unsolicited, attesting to the life-saving actions of another physician: Dr. Josef Jaksy. On this basis, and on the strength of other material provided to Yad Vashem, Dr. Josef Jaksy has been designated "Righteous Among the Nations," the State of Israel's highest recognition.

One of the first stories that Dr. Jaksy (or Yanl as he is called) told me was about the small Slovakian village, Nemecka Lupca, where he was born. There were approximately 2600 people in the village - mostly Christian, with about 7 or 8 Jewish families, one of whom was an Elbert family who had owned the village's only inn for five generations.

The inn's ground floor was where Dr. Jaksy's grandmother shopped and discussed important family issues with the elder Mr. Elbert, including questions of Yanl's future: should he become a general, a priest or something else? Mr. Elbert recommended medicine, for Yanl was an exceptional student who completed the Gymnasium in three, not four, years, and was highly gifted both intellectually and socially.

With sadness, Dr. Jaksy said that when the Nazi persecution against the Jews began in earnest, the Elberts were forced to hand the keys to their home of five generations over to the Germans and leave within 24 hours. He recalled how they were escorted to the edge of town by the entire village; the Gypsy's played music and everyone was crying as they said good-bye.

An internationally renowned surgeon, one of Europe's youngest professors of urology, chief of the state clinic, personal physician to Hlinka, Bishop of Slovakia, urologist to Msgr. Tiso, President of Slovakia and ally of Hitler, physician to the collaborationist mayor of Bratislava, Dr. Jaksy used his position to save lives from the Nazi death machine.



"Himself a Christian, he put himself in harm's way, risking his life to rescue Jews, Allied pilots and partisans from the horrible, single-minded evil of the Nazis... he used his influence, his wits, his money, his talents to hide them and feed them, treat them, to remove them from danger-- all of it with the certain knowledge that at any moment the official terror of the state could turn on him and destroy him".

--Marjorie M. Cuomo, Governor, State of New York.

When the anti-Jewish persecutions entered an acute phase, Dr. Jaksy and a handful of friends (several physicians as well) met to decide how they could help their Jewish neighbors. They conceived a fourfold plan:

- find hiding places
- provide money, food and medicine
- provide false identification papers
- help people escape the country.

Dr. Jaksy embarked on a mission to save lives. He hid Jews in his clinic, including a 60-year old woman who hid for nearly three years in his private bathroom in the clinic and who only came out of hiding at night. The only other person who knew of her existence was Dr. Jaksy's maid, who provided meals for the woman and who Dr. Jaksy paid to ensure silence.

After being forced to vacate his three-story villa to the Germans for use as a headquarters, and unwilling to comply with orders calling on Christians to divorce Jewish spouses, he secluded his first wife in several places - in Budapest, on a farm and in a sanatorium. With false papers and visas, Dr. Jaksy then smuggled his wife to Switzerland where she remained throughout the war years.

As a urologist, Dr. Jaksy was able to save Jewish men from the notorious "trouser checks" by performing surgeries and providing certificates stating that their circumcisions had been performed for phemosis, a medical ailment curable by circumcision. To further protect these men from the Gestapo, he coached them on the nature of their symptoms.

Dr. Jaksy often performed false operations. Learning that a David Ekstein, whom he had been hiding in the clinic, was about to be arrested and deported by the Gestapo, Dr. Jaksy put Mr. Ekstein on the operating table, opened his abdomen slightly, and, when the Gestapo arrived, told them that Mr. Ekstein had just undergone surgery and could not be moved or taken.

This particular story was told by Alexander Ekstein, son of David Ekstein, whose life was also saved by Dr. Jaksy. In two books and in testimony for Yad Vashem, Alexander Ekstein wrote:

"We found ourselves at a collection point for Jews who had been rounded up in the last few days; it was in the courtyard of the building on #6 Edloba Street. We knew that within a day or two we are going to be transferred to a transition camp and then to Auschwitz. As a physician, my wife was able to arrange an emergency check-up for three patients in the city. One of them was me. From the collection point we were accompanied by a German soldier. When he handed me over to the urological clinic of Dr. Jaksy, he announced that he will come for me in two hours. This period of time was sufficient for Dr. Jaksy to find me a hiding place. My wife was hidden by the nun-nurses. Also the two other Jews were hidden (all through the efforts of Dr. Jaksy). When the German soldier came back and didn't find us, he started to get wild. Dr. Jaksy coolly responded that the patients ran away, most likely in the doctors' absence....and that after all they are not responsible on guarding prisoner-patients....We were all hidden by Dr. Jaksy....His name preceded him in our circles as the saviour of Jews and the one who helps in any way he can."

Alexander Ekstein eventually wound up hiding in the villa of Dr. Max Grassell, the Swiss Consul, with whom Dr. Jaksy worked closely to save peoples lives.

With the unwitting assistance of a senior officer of the German Headquarters in Bratislava, whom he had successfully treated for kidney disease, Dr. Jaksy smuggled food in a German staff limousine to Jewish friends hiding in Vienna. The officer had been a patient of Dr. Jaksy after having been treated unsuccessfully by another physician. Perhaps out of gratitude, he became the main source of the "impossible to get" exit visas. Dr. Jaksy believes that there was an unspoken tacit agreement between him and this high ranking German official.

Dr. Jaksy similarly used his position as the personal physician of the city's collaborationist Mayor. Twice a month, Dr. Jaksy received gold printed invitations to participate in dinner parties at the Mayor's mansion. The Mayor's chauffeur picked up Dr. Jaksy in the black limousine with the Mayor's gold emblem on it and brought him to the party. There, Dr. Jaksy was offered the use of the car to take him across the border to Vienna, ostensibly to lecture at the Urological Medical Association Conference. Dr. Jaksy delivered the lectures, and, in addition, food, medicine and money to his friends in hiding.

On another occasion, Dr. Jaksy stayed on the outskirts of Bratislava at the home of his Jewish friends, the Surans. He protected the Surans by purchasing their villa "on paper". He then declared the elder Mr. Suran to be his gardener and Mrs. Suran to be his maid, and had arranged false papers for the Surans' daughters to flee to South America.

In the middle of one night, the Gestapo arrived at the Surans' garden gate. Mrs. Suran hid in a barrel in the kitchen closet, Mr. Suran in a pit in the back yard. Dr. Jaksy answered the bell and the Gestapo ordered him to open the gate; they were looking for Jews. Dr. Jaksy said there were none there. The Gestapo ran past him and went through the house room to room, floor to floor, but found no one. The next morning, after coaching her on how to conduct herself to avoid detection by the Gestapo, Dr. Jaksy drove Mrs. Suran to the train station. With the false papers he had given her, she boarded the train for the Tatra mountains, and safety.

Dr. Jaksy also helped save Allied pilots who were shot down and rescued by the underground. During the night, the underground would bring the pilots to him, and he would put their heads in casts that immobilized their jaws so that as they were being smuggled out of the country, they would not betray their foreign identity under any possible interrogation.

There were times during those years that Dr. Jaksy's activities were suspected by the Gestapo, but he was never arrested. Before smuggling his first wife to Switzerland, for example, Dr. Jaksy had hidden her in Kunsch Sanatorium. While he was visiting her there one Christmas, the Gestapo arrived, looking for him. As he left the building and began to descend the steps, the Gestapo passed him on their way in to the building. He did not know they were looking for him; they did not recognize him.

At another time, when orders for Dr. Jaksy's arrest had been issued, a patient of his working as a cleaning person in police headquarters stole the arrest papers, and Dr. Jaksy narrowly escaped being apprehended and shot.

An original document written and signed by the Captain of the Czechoslovak Partisan Brigade, states:

"During the whole time of the persecution, he (Dr. Jaksy) functioned in the same way toward political or racially persecuted people. From 1943 his medical office and his private apartment in the clinic became a center of illegal activities. There we met with the University Professor (listing names of various physicians) and at that time Dr. Jaksy gave us very valuable information from an agent of the Gestapo whom he bribed.

By July 1944 when I was already in the partisan headquarters in Sklabín, he sent us important information about the Gestapo, the Slovak secret police and the German army massing on our borders. After the beginning of the uprising of the Slovak people, he personally brought us information and medicine as well as partisans, in his car. In his clinic often treated and hid partisans, Russian and French escapees from German concentration camps. This confirmation I give

under oath in connection with the activities of Prof. Dr. Joseph Jaksy and the National Freedom Fighters of the new Czechoslovak Socialist Republic."

In 1948, the new Communist regime in Czechoslovakia arrested or executed all partisans who worked against the Nazis. Dr. Jaksy was sentenced to death. Fortunately, he was in the United States on a visiting fellowship; he never returned to Czechoslovakia.

At tremendous daily risk to his own life, Dr. Jaksy had quietly practiced righteousness and saved the lives of others. On March 6th, 1991, in a simple ceremony in his Upper West Side apartment, he received tribute from Governor Mario Cuomo, and was honored by Yad Vashem of Jerusalem. After the war, he had declined the efforts of Bratislava's Jewish community to honor him. Before I brought his story to the attention of various individuals and organizations, I asked him why had he done it all? In a gentle tone and with a soft smile on his face, he said, "Wouldn't you do it for your neighbor?" In the official citation from Governor Mario M. Cuomo it says: "Sometimes we look for heroes in the wrong places. They are among us - quietly, humbly, courageously sustaining our world".

Dr. Arthur Tessler, a colleague and friend of Dr. Jaksy at N.Y.U. Medical Center, where Dr. Jaksy practiced and taught for over 35 years was surprised and awed when I first told him of Dr. Jaksy's wartime deeds. He said, "It should not have surprised me that this quiet, gentle and obviously cultured physician never described his humanism and heroism. It is with pride this giant among us who befriended a then young resident, includes me amongst his friends".

Governor Cuomo's citation concludes:

"In a lifetime, each of us comes to know a few select individuals whose own lives of service to others, of love, compassion and humility outbalance our world's great weight of sin and evil, sustaining us and the world....With our profound gratitude for the singular example he has provided us of what the human spirit is at its best."



Addendum:

The following incidents or aspects of Dr. Jaksy's life may or may not be included in the film:

- Receipt of Legion d' Honneur of France
- Studied in Paris with Madame Curie
- In 1926 played in all-night chess match with Russian International Champion and defeated him.
- Stories of his childhood and adolescence. Sunday afternoon invitations to coffee musicales where mothers observed and then arranged matches. The young Dr. Jaksy was particularly desirable.
- His magnanimous personality afforded him many different and interesting relationships.
- His life with a Jewish family between ages 8-17 as a boarder during his Gymnasium years.
- His imprisonment in Italy during World War I.
- He never met his father. Father died tragically in America.