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From Kaiserschmarrn & Sports to Krav Maga: How Political Circumstances and Fascist Terror led to the Creation of a Jewish Hero and his Lasting Legacy

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"Not everyone who walks on two legs is indeed a human being."
(Imi Lichtenfeld, in Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2001: 240)

Abstract

This article describes the transformation of Imrich "Imi" Lichtenfeld, from sportsman to active fighter against Nazi terror in Bratislava, Slovakia, in the 1930s. The main reason for this was the political situation there at that time. In addition, the article is intended to save the person of Lichtenfeld from oblivion, not only in academic circles. Since there is hardly any research available on his persona, excerpts from an interview with one of his friends should serve to shed some light on the private side of this Jewish hero.

Introduction

The concept of a hero, what constitutes one, or what kind of person could be called one, is subject to an ongoing debate, since the term seems to be overused in modern society. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides several definitions for the term *hero*, as well as for its synonyms *icon* or *idol*, for instance:

- *A mythological or legendary figure [...] with great strength or ability*
- *An illustrious warrior*
- *A person admired for achievements and noble qualities*
- *One who shows great courage*
- *The central figure in an event, period, or movement*
- *An object of extreme admiration and devotion*

(Merriam-Webster, 2020)

The above definitions can easily be applied to the Jewish sportsman Imrich "Imi" Lichtenfeld in order to call him a hero, whereas for many others, for example, friends or fellow sportsmen, he was their idol or still serves as an icon of sportsmanship. Lichtenfeld not only fulfills everything that defines a hero, but, his life was also characterized by a constant support for fellow citizens, resistance against evil, the physical defense of human lives, and the fight for the Jewish cause and humanity in general. Political circumstances in the 1930s in Bratislava in Slovakia, his hometown, directly influenced Lichtenfeld's character transformation - from a young sportsman, who

enjoyed sports and life, into an accidental hero for the city's Jewish community. As a role model for courage, he still is an ongoing source of hope for the worldwide Jewish community. Moreover, he created a self-defense style, that later became known as *Krav Maga*, used today by military and police forces in Israel and throughout the world. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are joining sports clubs that offer *Krav Maga* world-wide with the goal of self-protection or fitness. Through his lifework, the formation of the Krav Maga Foundation, he left a legacy for generations to come, a legacy that goes beyond his reputation as a "protector of his Jewish community", as one can read on a memorial plaque inaugurated in his honor in Bratislava (Yaron Lichtenstein. E-mail Interview. September 28, 2018).

All available stories, books, and publications depict "Imi", as he is called by devoted followers and friends, as a fighter and gentleman with a sense of honor and a philosophy of life deeply rooted in humanity. It seems, however, that his persona and life are, even in academic circles, almost vanishing into oblivion - a trend that this article intends to bring to a halt. This article shall describe and comment on Imi Lichtenfeld's youth, as well as his personality development, which was directly influenced by the political circumstances in his home country. Astonishingly enough, the realm of academia lacks research on this persona who stands out as a symbol of active resistance against Nazi terror and belongs to the representatives of outstanding personalities who destroyed every existing legend of the dithering, inactive Jew who does not dare to rebel, a cliché that is still largely anchored in the non-Jewish population today (Gems, 2014: 115). One of the possible explanations why aspects of his life are still shrouded in mystery is his characteristic of not putting himself in the spotlight and telling about himself. There are only few available paragraphs about his life in textbooks published by him or his fellows. Furthermore, since he had trained Israeli special forces for many years, government secrecy might come into play. Whereas historic sources about almost all aspects of Jewish life in Europe seem inexhaustible, literature on him is limited to textbooks on self-defense with relatively little information about his personal life, as well as newspaper interviews. The excerpts from the as yet unpublished interviews with Yaron Lichtenstein and Michal Vaněk, which are quoted or paraphrased below, reveal a bit more of the human side of Lichtenfeld's persona and serve as a statement that he also served as a role model in his private life. Lichtenstein was a friend of Imi Lichtenfeld and one of the few students who received their black belt directly from him. For him, it is an important concern not to let the legacy of Imi be forgotten. He was invited to Bratislava by Michal Vaněk, a curator of the Museum of Jewish Culture there.

Two Museums, Two Views

Jana Liptáková argued in an article that Imi Lichtenfeld is better known in Israel than in his hometown of Bratislava (Liptáková, 2018). The

search for his name or similar keywords leads to zero results on the website *www.Slovakia.com* (Web1). Her argument seems however thwarted when the name Lichtenfeld does not appear on lists of famous Jewish people published by institutions in Israel. In 2016, for instance, The Museum of the Jewish People - Beit Hatfutsot, in Tel Aviv, had released a list of “Top 144 Heroes of the Jewish People”, who are described as “Trailblazers”, among them director Woody Allen, boxer Max Baer, the biblical King David, philosopher Jacques Derrida, the German poet Heinrich Heine, singer Barbara Streisand, and even *Facebook* entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg. On its website, the museum offers an explanation on why it had chosen the 144 persons:

*Jews, like every other people, teach the new generation about the values and actions they should pursue through its choice of heroes. Heroes are the subject of countless stories and dreams. They are our role models. But there is something special, unusual about the Jewish hero. We have always understood that there are many different ways to be a hero. **Heroes – Trailblazers of the Jewish People** is a refreshing view of what it really means to be a hero. Visitors will meet different types of Jewish heroes throughout our history including scientists, intellectuals, leaders, revolutionaries, cultural figures, athletes and more – men and women with unique talents. This remarkable and diverse selection represents the heroism of our people through history, while showing that success has many different faces. These heroes will inspire children – and their parents – to ask who is truly brave, and to identify their own personal heroes and role models. The exhibition will illustrate that being a hero comes from conquering our worst instincts and daring to think and act differently from the crowd. (Web2: “The Museum of the Jewish People”)*

Obviously, not every Jewish person with accomplishments could have made the list, and one has to give it to the selection committee that the choices were not easy ones. Lichtenfeld, so far, has never been depicted in movies nor as a protagonist in literary works, like his contemporary, the American world boxing champion Max Baer, in a 2016 novel (Neugeboren, 2016). When, however, in the opinion of the selection committee, entertainers, philosophers, and billionaires are presented as heroes to inspire future generations, then Imi Lichtenfeld, a man who actively fought against terror hordes, fought in World War II, and who has left a lasting legacy, should at least have received an honorable mention.

In the summer of 2018, on the other hand, an attempt was made to honor the merits of Imi Lichtenfeld in his hometown. Yaron Lichtenstein, who had known him since a very young age, was able to honor his late teacher, mentor, and friend Imrich “Imi” Lichtenfeld by unveiling a memorial

plaque. The memorial plaque was placed on a house near the old town of Bratislava (Yaron Lichtenstein. E-mail Interview. September 28, 2018). The inscription on the plaque reads as follows, bilingually in Slovakian and English:

*IMRICH „IMI” LICHTENFELD
(1910 – 1998)
(...)
IN MEMORY OF AN EXCEPTIONAL ATHLETE,
PROTECTOR OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BRATISLAVA’S PODHRADIE
DISTRICT,
AND THE INVENTOR OF MARTIAL ART FOR SELF-DEFENSE
KRAV MAGA*

Not to let one of Bratislava’s, even Slovakia’s, most famous people fall into oblivion, the Museum of Jewish Culture, there, had organized an exhibition to honor his legacy under the curatorship of Michal Vaněk (SNM exhibition, 2018). The organizers were facing manifold problems: Not only were parts of Lichtenfeld’s life shrouded in mystery, but most of his family members and friends were deceased and exhibits to display were hard to come by (Vaněk, “Re: On Imi Lichtenfeld” E-mail, September 25, 2018).

The museum’s exhibition supported the fact that Imi Lichtenfeld was a hero for many who lived in Bratislava in the 1930s; he still is an icon for those who trained with him and those who are practicing *Krav Maga*. For Yaron Lichtenstein, sitting outside of a coffee shop and sipping a coffee was significant. Only steps away from the house in which Imi Lichtenfeld used to live, he was able to immerse himself in the hustle and bustle of the city the same way his idol Imi must have been. For him, history was coming back to life by remembering Lichtenfeld’s narratives:

Bratislava is a very unique city; it’s a very spiritual city. Therefore, the coffee in Bratislava is not really a coffee, it has the spirit of Imi inside. So, each time somebody has a coffee in Bratislava, he actually [imbibes] a small part of Imi. For me, it was a very big memory. [Lichtenfeld] talked all the time about Bratislava. He loved the city very much. (Yaron Lichtenstein, E-mail Interview. September 28, 2018.)

The more important thing for him, however, was the fact that he contributed not only to honor Imi Lichtenfeld, but to ensure that memories of him are preserved from vanishing into oblivion, as it sometimes seemed to, even in Bratislava, his beloved hometown that also had been the community of the people he fought for (Lichtenstein, E-mail, 2018).

The Political Situation in Eastern Europe

Famous for its ethnic diversity, Eastern Europe has for centuries been home to people from many nationalities who had to coexist. Particular national

movements have thus in recent times been examined by scholars focusing more and more on specific territories, including their national interactions, or individual regions instead of countries (Maxwell, 2012: 7). Hungarians, Slovaks, Germans, and many more ethnic groups settled in the territory of modern-day Slovakia, making it a melting pot of people, cultures and religions, all influencing each other, but also differentiating themselves from one another due to their cultural particularities (Mahoney, 2011: 11). Therefore, Slovakia is considered a “multiethnic state” (Frucht, 2005: 323). The state was part of Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1939, and later again from 1945 until 1992. Under political pressure from Nazi Germany, the country became an independent state from 1939-1945. Because of strong political alliances and political party ties Slovakia was considered a German “satellite State” (Friedmann, 1954: 70). The history of the Jewish population can only be understood in relation to the multi-ethnicity of the region:

The decentralized character of the territory and the importance of its regional particularities strongly influenced the development of the Jewish community, helping to shape the wide range of religious, cultural, and political affiliations throughout its history. While evidence exists of Jewish migration to the territory of today's Slovakia from Bohemia, Austria, and Germany in the 11th century, and of the founding of the first Jewish community in Bratislava (Pressburg, Pozsony) in the late 13th century, the migrations and settlements of the 17th and 18th centuries had the most significant impact on the subsequent development of the Jewish community. [...] Bratislava became the seat of Hungarian Jewish Orthodoxy under the leadership of the renowned Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, known as the Chatam Sofer (1762-1839). (Klein-Pejšová, 2018)

The liberalization of state and public life at the end of the 19th century brought with it the de facto and legal equality for the Jews in the area of today's Slovakia.

One expression of this liberalization were the laws on religious freedom, which were passed in 1894-95. As a result, the Jews were equated with religiously different denominations, especially compared to Christianity. In practice, however, many clerics and Catholic politicians in particular tried to undermine the liberalization in the legislation and everyday life of the Jewish population with anti-capitalist and anti-Jewish slogans. The target groups of these slogans were especially the petty bourgeoisie and the peasants. These social groups were partly economically threatened and often had an ambivalent relationship to Judaism. Thus, they were susceptible to this kind of propaganda. Political and economic problems and complications arose after the foundation of the state of Czechoslovakia in 1918, because two

territories with different historical developments were united into one state (Lipscher, 1980: 11-12).

One of the ruling political parties was the Slovak People's Party, which until 1918 had served as an umbrella formation for a clerical political movement. The aims of this party "were to safeguard and promote the national life of the Slovak people and to fight the enemies of Slovak national, social, political, and religious life" (Jelinek, 1971: 97). The party used anti-capitalist propaganda intensively, in particular trying to reach parts of the population that now were affected by poverty. These people were the ones who suffered most from economic stagnation in the territory. Also, for quite some time some Jews had held relatively important leadership positions in the economic sector. In addition, many Jews belonged to the middle class, they worked as craftsmen or traders, others were doctors or lawyers. Not unlike what happened in Germany, the idea was propagated that Jewish capital was the root of all evil. In addition, there were accusations that many Jews would lean too much towards a Hungarian identity. This was true but historically influenced since the Jews were never able to integrate properly into the Slovak society because prerequisites were lacking. They did nothing other differently than most Slovaks: they were sceptical about their integration into Czechoslovakia (Lipscher, 1980: 12-14). In their publications, historians Pavol Mešťan and Yeshayahu Jelinek have independently pointed out that there are still many areas and topics that have hardly been explored historically or that are worth exploring.

The attitude of Czechs and Slovaks to the Jewish population with whom they were living after the creation of the Czechoslovak state in 1918 was affected by the extraordinary tragic fate of this community in previous historical areas. (Mešťan, 2015: 3)

For Jelinek it is the creation and history of the extreme right-wing arms and paramilitary organizations of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, the *Hlinka Guards* and its predecessor, the *Rodobrana*, that need to be explored in greater depth (Jelinek, 1971: 97). Both topics and events play an integral part for the scholarly interrogation of the treatment of Jews in Slovakia after 1918 and, therefore, also for the character development Imi Lichtenfeld went through.

In 1925, the Slovak People's Party was renamed the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (Lipscher, 1980: 12). It was now named after its leader, the Catholic Priest Andrej Hlinka, who is described by historian Jelinek as "an ardent nationalist and bigoted Catholic" (Jelinek, 1971: 97). Already at the beginning of the 1920s, the so-called *Rodobrana* was founded. The name loosely translates into "*Nation's Defense*". Since there were many smaller paramilitary groups and sub-groups with similar political goals, the scholarly debate about the origin and foundation of the *Rodobrana* is continuing. In the

mid-1920s the members of the organization were viewed as fascists because the party was closely linked to the views that prevailed in Italy under Mussolini. However, not too much of the organization itself was revealed to non-members or the outside world. Much of what is known today about the *Rodobrana* stems from records of political opponents at this time. As the organization posed a threat to the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia it was first banned in 1923. This ban on its political activities was confirmed in the following years, as the organization secretly continued to exist. With the imprisonment of one of their leaders the downfall of the *Rodobrana* was sealed. In the background, however, some of their members were still active until the 1930s. With other groups, they had belonged to the radical right wing of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party and had established ties with fascist groups in other countries (Jelinek, 1971: 98-102).

Increase of Terror

Mass demonstrations occurred in Bratislava the first time in June 1938. The first was organized for supporters and sympathizers of the Hlinka Party, and at the second their opponents gathered. This opposition was an alarming signal for Hlinka's supporters because they feared for the political future of the party. The idea to form a radical group to defend the party and its activities was particularly well received by fanatics. As a result, the *Hlinka Guard* was formed. One of their main goals was to spread terror, especially among the Jewish population or their organizations. The *Hlinka Guard* was a popular organization in Slovakia and won more and more sympathizers and members. The militia organization was dependent on the Hlinka party for financing. Another possibility for the collection of money was the blackmailing of Jews. Some Jews paid voluntarily for letters of safe conduct or the promise of safety. In addition, there are indications that donations came from abroad, including from Germany (Jelinek, 1971: 102-106).

It soon became clear that the Hlinka Guard did not operate independently, Jelinek points out:

In the streets, the Guard co-operated with bands of ethnic Germans and carried on pro-Nazi propaganda. (...) The Nazis owed much to the Slovak radicals, who gave them the pretext for interfering in the internal affairs of the Second republic. (Jelinek, 1971: 106)

Upon closer examination and comparison with Germany at that time, it is noticeable that there are decisive similarities. The political orientations and actions of the *Rodobrana* and the *Hlinka Guard* were similar to those of the German SA and SS. The brutality of the radical Slovakian organizations in taking action against political opponents was on a par with those in Germany because their purpose was to achieve political goals through violence. Their violent behavior could be seen especially in the streets of Bratislava. This was

the political climate in which the well- educated sportsman Imi Lichtenfeld and his friends grew up.

Of the 140,000 people that lived in Bratislava, roughly 20,000 were Jews, whereas Slovaks, Czechs, and Germans counted for about 40,000 each (Bierman, 1984: 45). With the increase in anti-Jewish propaganda, various groups, like nationalists, Nazis, and members of the *Hlinka Guard*, also gained greater self-confidence in the sense of readiness to exercise violence. Already in the 1920s there had been political conflicts, which were carried out by force. However, in the 1930s violence increased and there were more street fights, especially in Bratislava's Jewish quarter. However, it was not only the fighters of the Jewish sports clubs in Bratislava who resisted the terror and defended their territory and people. First, there was passive resistance, then the street fights began, and much later, during the war, the Jews fought back with weapons. Jelinek divides the Jewish resistance in the area into four periods:

From the establishment of independent Slovakia in 1939 to the beginning of the deportations, in the spring of 1942; then until the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising on August 29, 1944; the two months of the Uprising, and finally from the suppression of the Uprising until April, 1945. In the first period, the Jews were not aware of the coming dangers. (Jelinek, 1967: 416)

With upmost respect to the late historian, I argue that the resistance began even earlier. Street fights like the ones in Bratislava's Jewish quarter bear witness to this. Also, it seems hard to believe that parts of the Jewish population were "not aware of the coming dangers". They might not have been aware of the severity of the looming dangers or their fate that were waiting for them, like of ending up in concentration camps. It seems unlikely that they were in no way aware of those dangers. Admittedly, denial must have played an essential part for some who wanted to wait and sit out their situations. Since the 1920s, however, the territory of Slovakia was not only exposed to anti-Jewish propaganda, but, also to an increase of violent attacks against Jews as well as racketeering and destruction of Jewish religious symbols and objects. Besides the oral transmission of news of violent incidents and events, there were other information channels at that time with reports of danger to the Jewish community or individuals. Thus, it seems unlikely that most Jewish people were not aware of more looming dangers. John Bierman reports that some Jews recognized the warning signs. They often hesitated, however, to leave their country (Bierman, 1984: 47).

In late 1938, after the Munich agreement, the dissolution of the State of Czechoslovakia began. With the agreement, the decision was made that Czechoslovakia had to give up parts of its land. In return it would receive guarantees that would protect its remaining territories (Lumans, 1982: 268).

The annexation of territories and towns like Petrežalka, a town in the greater area of Bratislava, began immediately. Jews and Slovaks fled as soon as they could. They “feared the application of the Nuremberg laws, and Slovaks [...] wished to avoid Germanizing policies.” (Pittaway, 2012: 143). In retrospect, scholars argue that before the Munich agreement certain political preconditions existed in Czechoslovakia “to create a harmonic, democratic society in which the national ambitions of Slovaks, too, would have been accomplished” (Broklová, 1993: 41). The next year the Slovak state, which existed from 1939-1945 was founded and led by Josef Tiso (Conway, 1974: 85). He was a Roman Catholic priest who was an influential leader in the *Hlinka Guard* and took over the position of Andrej Hlinka as the leader of Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party. Shortly after he in 1939 met Hitler in person in Berlin to discuss his role in a possible break up from Czechoslovakia, Tiso “had the Slovak Assembly proclaim independence” (Kershaw, 2008: 476). Tiso's desire was to establish a relationship with Hitler that was characterized by trust (Ward, 2013: 184).

The relationship with Hitler secured the state against Hungarian irredentism and provided a more powerful economic patron than the Czechs. But the cost was high. Germany was more interested in exploiting Slovakia than in investing in her. Tiso had to follow Hitler into wars, a constant frustration for the priest’s desire to quit revolutionary time. (Ward, 2013: 242)

Especially the political events at the end of the 1930s were decisive for the fact that Lichtenfeld had to leave his homeland later.

Childhood

Imi Lichtenfeld was born in May 1910 in Budapest, Hungary, where Jews made up almost 25 per cent of the population. Karl Lueger, a former mayor of Vienna, derogatively alluded to this fact by calling the city “Judapest” (Pfeiffer, 2004). Soon after his birth his mother returned with him to Pressburg, as Bratislava was named at that time. The exact reason why Lichtenfeld’s mother chose Budapest to give birth remains unclear, family ties might have played a role. It was also customary for women from Pressburg to give birth to their children in Budapest (Vaněk, “Re: On Imi Lichtenfeld” E-mail, September 25, 2018).

Lichtenfeld was born at a time when the Jewish community of this area was able to enjoy relative religious and economic freedom. He grew up in Bratislava and was introduced to all kinds of sports by his father, Samuel Lichtenfeld. The father had traveled with a circus troupe for many years. After his time at the circus he came to Bratislava and opened a sports club. He then joined the police force and rose in higher positions professionally. As Chief Detective he made more arrests among the group of dangerous violent

criminals and murderers than most of his colleagues. His knowledge of martial arts inevitably contributed to the many arrests, so much so that he trained his colleagues on how to successfully apprehend criminals. He had learned this knowledge of self-defense and fighting from a variety of people from all over the world during his time at the circus (Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2001: 224).

The Young Sportsman

Growing up, Imi Lichtenfeld could watch his father teaching others at his gym. Later, he was not only coached by him, but subsequently found his real passion in sports and became an exceptional athlete. He won several national championships in wrestling and boxing, and he even became an international champion in gymnastics. Lichtenfeld began to concentrate on wrestling and became a member of the national team; he was considered one of Europe's best wrestlers (Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2003: 223-224). Later, his excellent swimming saved others from drowning (Bierman, 1984: 91-92). In his parental home, it was important that law, order, and humanities were part of Imi's education. Also, the cosmopolitan worldview that his father had experienced through working with people from other nations contributed to his education and formation of character. His humanistic education found its expression among other things in the fact that he spoke several languages, like Slovak, German, Hungarian, Yiddish, and Hebrew (Vaněk, "Re: On Imi Lichtenfeld" E-mail, September 25, 2018). He also successfully took part in theatre performances. In a role as *Mephisto* in a ballet performance, for instance, he was celebrated by the audience and critics alike (Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2003: 223-224). Lichtenfeld's formative years in Bratislava were also sparked with wit and joie de vivre. He was a member of the Maccabiah Sports Club, one of the most prominent clubs that organized national and international sporting events for Jewish athletes (Helman, 2007: 96). These clubs served as institutions where the young athletes received orientation, could explore their masculinity, and were part of a community. Their individual sports also functioned, as Sheinin put it, "as an identity bridge" to manhood (2014: 13). In a psychological sense these organized sports clubs were institutions that would alleviate images of physically weak Jewish young men, as Gems writes, because according to him, "The stereotype of the weak Jewish man persists to this day" (2014: 115).

Besides sports, the enjoyment of love and life is universal and Imi Lichtenfeld was no exception to enjoy life in his youth. John Bierman describes him as a "local celebrity" as well as through the eyes of a woman who knew him:

She had watched him in the ring, quick and lethal as a striking snake, winning the All-Slovakia lightweight wrestling championship; she had seen him on the dance floor, lean and lithe as a randy tomcat, winning the tango prize in the city

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ballroom-dancing contest, and she had heard, through the gossip of the town, of his reputation as an accomplished chaser of skirt.” (Bierman, 1984: 42-43)

Lichtenfeld also indulged in culinary delights, even though he had to pay attention not to gain weight as a sportsman, in order to stay in his weight class.

“Imi liked to eat Schinken, (...) each time I go to Germany, I eat it. He also introduced me to Kaiserschmarrn [a sweet Austrian pancake] .” (Lichtenstein Interview)

The brief descriptions above underline the fact that Imi Lichtenfeld genuinely enjoyed life as a young man in Bratislava. Political circumstances, however, were changing, slowly at first, bringing with them problems for the Jewish population.

Fighting Against the Terror

Nathan Siegel summarizes the political developments since the 1920s in Bratislava in his essay with only a few words, covering a period of about 20 years:

Bratislava was no place for dancing. From the 1920s, fascist paramilitary groups in Slovakia developed ties to the Nazis via the Slovak Populist Party. After the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, their members routinely beat Jews, looted their stores and signed them up for deportation. Later, the paramilitary groups would run Slovakia’s concentration camps. (Siegel, 2014)

Obviously, he uses the word “dancing” as an example to describe the glaring differences that the Jews had to endure in their lives until 1945.

As history has shown, there is no need for radical grounds for violent expression of political differences or views, as it often was the case for street fights in the city. Supposedly a movie screening in 1936 led to the first major outbreak of antisemitic violence. According to journalist John Bierman’s report it was the showing of a movie about the “Golem of Prague” (Bierman, 1984: 45). The original German silent horror movie from 1915 and later versions were inspired by an ancient Jewish legend, in which a Rabbi creates a Golem, an artificial being, to protect his people from anti-Semites. In the U.S. the movie was distributed under the title *The Monster of Fate*.¹ Anti-Jewish groups, local Nazis and sympathizers demonstrated outside the building against the ideology that the film, in their view, conveyed. For them, the depiction of Jews in the movie was all too sympathetic.

The demonstration turned into violent street battles. Now some tried to force their way into the Jewish quarter. In a very short time, Imi Lichtenfeld organized the resistance to push back the invaders. His fellow fighters were mostly his friends and comrades from the Jewish sports clubs. They were

wrestlers, boxers, and weightlifters that stuck together and thus were able to drive the invaders out. According to Bierman, one right-wing leaning newspaper headlined the next day: “JEWS MAKING POGROM. CHRISTIAN BLOOD FLOWS IN JEWISH STREETS.” (Bierman, 1984: 45)

Up until 1940, Imi Lichtenfeld had organized and taken part in countless violent clashes and brutal street battles. He sometimes had to fight a group of people by himself. He and his companions were often confronted by crowds of several hundred people, sometimes even by thousands of people from Bratislava or its surroundings who tried to enter the Jewish quarter in order to terrorize the inhabitants (Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2001: 225). In an interview with the magazine *People* in 1976, Imi Lichtenfeld recalled his role during that time:

“I began fighting anti-Semitism in the ‘30s. When the Hitler youth gangs used to single out Jewish young men on the streets, it was either hit or run. I found the hitting more satisfying.” (Gonzalez Jr., 1976)

His last sentence of his statement is evidence that the young, educated man had undergone a transformation. His statement expresses the brutal reality, but also contains a little irony.

Despite the obvious physical and psychological stress the young men were subjected to during street clashes, it seems that the fighter Lichtenfeld had never lost his sense of humor. One of his favorite anecdotes about his experiences during street fights he often gladly recounted, is recorded in the German version of the book *Krava Maga*:

One day, with a small group of Jewish athletes by his side, he defended himself against several hundred Slovak antisemitic rioters who tried to invade the Jewish quarter. The 16 defenders, mostly young wrestlers, boxers and weightlifters, who were clearly in the minority, were immediately involved in numerous fierce street battles. Imi Lichtenfeld always remembered that because of the many opponents he had to deal with, he didn't have time to hit a single Rowdie more than once... When the fight began, a German who stood nearby joined them. He had smoked his pipe and watched the scene until then. He fought vigorously on the side of the Jewish defenders until the mounted police arrived and forced the mob to retreat. When Imi asked the volunteer why he had risked his life in a foreign battle, he simply replied: “You were so few and they were so many. I found that very unfair...” (Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2003: 229)

As amusing as this little episode might appear when reading it, it shows that not every Gentile was a mere bystander watching violence against Jews without taking action, even though bystanders made up the majority. The involvement of the German meant not only physical, but also moral support for the defenders. As Fulbrooks writes:

In this analysis of situational dynamics, there is no real possibility of “innocence,” but rather only one of asking, “Whose side are you on?” In a sense, then, the “innocence” of bystanders is only one possibility; guilt is equally possible, as is heroism, or indeed foolhardiness. All these imply both a pragmatic and a moral evaluation of the choices made by bystanders about the ways in which they did or did not become involved. (2018: 17)

Whatever his real motives were, at this moment the German was a welcomed addition to the group of Jewish defenders. With certainty it can be assumed that the Jewish athletes around Imi Lichtenfeld afterwards evaluated events and organized their future defense. Many of them were power athletes, including David Unreich, a good friend and wrestler. Unreich later became amateur and professional champion of the world, but had to flee to the U.S. after Slovakia became an independent state. In the U.S., one of his matches became legendary:

No other duel in the USA was closely watched as Unreich’s match versus Heffner, which took place on 22 June 1939. Ernst Heffner, the German champion, arrived at Boston’s Madison Square Garden convinced of his own victory. He claimed that he wasn’t a Nazi, but greeted the audience with Nazi salute until his Jewish adversary appeared. The match promised a riveting drama. Journalists raised tensions even more with the information that Unreich was from Czechoslovakia, which the Nazis had erased from the map a few months earlier. Unreich didn’t hesitate, and made short work of Heffner, “wrapping” him up by the sixth minute. Less than three months later, Nazi Germany started World war II. (Mózer and Vaněk, 2017)

It was often Unreich with whom Lichtenfeld had fought side by side to defend their quarter. Whenever he returned to Bratislava from sporting events, Unreich supported his friends and community since the attacks on Jews became more violent:

Radicals would smash store windows and loot them, and threw Torah scrolls out of some synagogues and burned them. At the end of 1938, in reaction to these attacks, David Unreich, Imrich “Imi” Lichtenfeld and members of Maccabi [a Jewish

sports club] formed a Jewish militia. A clash occurred with students from Svoradov Catholic boarding school and members of the Deutsche Partei. Jewish youths beat them up and disappeared, so the police didn't catch anyone. (Mózer and Vaněk 2017)

The street fights were not fought exclusively in the city's Jewish quarter, but also on nearby streets. Lichtenfeld was not only a well-known man in the city, but had become a hero, an emblem of resistance, and a role-model for many younger Jews (Liptáková, 2018). He and his followers had decided not to be passive bystanders but to utilize their power and experiences from boxing and wrestling (Bierman, 1984: 45). The decision not to face a mob passively, but to fight it actively, testifies to a strong character. This also meant for them to change their thinking due to the fact that street fighting is considerably different than sports where one has to follow rules. Lichtenfeld, the great sportsman who had also received a humanistic education, was always actively involved in violent clashes and later stated that he “found the hitting more satisfying” (Gonzalez Jr., 1976). He had evolved from a rule-abiding wrestler and boxer to a risk-abiding fighter. This is not to say that he had transformed into a characterless violent individual. On the contrary. Everybody who knew him also knew that his beliefs were deeply rooted in humanity. His friends often remembered that he never allowed anyone else to pay for dinner at a restaurant. He always paid the bill (Yaron Lichtenstein. E-mail Interview. September 28, 2018).

Imi Lichtenfeld had assumed the role of a leader due to his acquired skills and had to undergo a character transformation because he had to fight violence with strength and counter violence, which is relatively rare for an athlete like him. There are not many comparable historical figures. His experience in street fighting became the foundation for the self-defense system he later developed (SNM, 2018). Thus, “it makes sense that a style developed for the streets was developed in the streets – the violently antisemitic streets of Bratislava in the 30s, that is.” (Siegel, 2014) Among other aspects, a fighting style for street clashes must be easy to acquire, make natural execution possible, and can easily be applied under stress. Exactly these conditions are fulfilled with Lichtenfeld's method that developed into the modern form of *Krav Maga*, according to *Krav Maga* instructor Juan M. Nieves (Nieves, 2019). The refinements and developments of these methods are credited to Lichtenfeld.

As violent as the attacks on Bratislava's Jewish community and the countless street fights were, they differed considerably from Nazi attacks on Jews in other European cities, because they were less vicious and brutal. Bierman puts forward the thesis that the reason for this was the number of inhabitants of the city:

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“Bratislava remained essentially a small town where everyone knew everyone else and where consequently the antagonists felt constrained to use fists and boots rather than guns and knives.” (Bierman, 1984: 46)

Although the severity of the violent conflicts must not be underestimated, Bierman was not the only one who points out differences of actions against the Jewish community compared to those in other areas of Eastern Europe. Obviously, the *Hlinka Guard*, for instance, was a radical-terrorist right-wing movement. These movements were common. Researching the history of the area, Yeshayahu Jelinek came to almost the same conclusions when comparing events, right-wing movements, and radical organizations:

The Hlinka Guard was not one of the few. It served the Nazis as an ersatz only. In favor of the Slovak people, it must be said that the number of fanatics and murderers among them was less than in Croatia, Rumania, or Hungary; to draw a simplistic parallel between the Hlinka Guard and the Ustasha, Iron Guard, or Arrow Cross, can be deceptive. (Jelinek, 1971: 119)

Lichtenfeld and his co-defenders often had to fight without prior warnings. Their everyday life was marked by danger and their fate was slowly sealed with the advent of the *Hlinka Guard* in 1938. Individual resistance or the formation of groups to fight back against terror could do nothing against this violent organization and its supporters. The situation for the Jews in Slovakia began to deteriorate more quickly, as was the case for Lichtenfeld. In May 1940 he took the last opportunity to flee and left the city with others on a small steam ship (SNM, 2018). Relatives and friends, especially his father, had urged him to use that last opportunity to escape. For Lichtenfeld, as for thousands of other Jews, the situation was bleak. With the new regime in power he knew that sooner or later he would have been arrested, since he was already “a marked man”. The reason for this was his reputation as a fighter, defender of his community, or the simple fact of being a Jew (Bierman, 1984: 44-46). Bierman goes on to underline his thesis:

Imre Lichtenfeld (...) of the 400 names appeared on the embarkation list of “the little death ship,” the S.S. Pentcho. Mostly they were perfectly ordinary people propelled by historical circumstances into a most extraordinary situation – some moved by simple self-preservation, others driven by a blinding ideal; some equipped to respond positively to the trials of the journey, others in every sense of the word mere passengers. What all of them had in common – those who were chasing a dream and those who were fleeing a nightmare – was simply that to the power that dominated the continent they were about to leave, they were equally worthless as members

of the same condemned species, the European Jew. (Bierman, 1984: 57)

After The Flight from Bratislava

Jews sought to avoid the persecution by escaping from Slovakia to other countries, including Hungary. Obviously, they felt no longer at home, here, or anywhere in Europe (Rosenblit, 2013: 111). By 1942, circa 60000 Slovakian Jews had already been deported to occupied Poland (Láníček, 2013: 82). The problem for Slovak Jews was that they were not welcome in the countries to which they fled. Historical developments and affiliations, animosities, and hatred of Jews were the reasons. The first wave of those deportations began in 1942, a second wave in September 1944 that lasted until March 1945, writes Klein-Pejšová:

“Approximately 105,000 Slovak Jews, or 77 per cent of their pre-war population, died during the war: accused by the Slovaks of being Magyarones, and by the Hungarians of being supporters of Czechoslovakia against Magyar interests.”
(2018)

At the height of the Slovak national uprising in the autumn of 1944 Lichtenfeld was already fighting under the British army command against Nazi forces. His father Samuel, however, suffered the same fate as thousands of other Slovakian Jews. In September of 1944 he was arrested, simply for being Jewish. He was rescued only moments before being deported by train. Under a pretense his colleague, a police officer, picked him up, thus saving him. Only a few weeks later, however, he was arrested again and deported. His life ended in the Auschwitz concentration camp (SNM, 2018). Most of Lichtenfeld’s family members were exposed to Nazi terror and died in concentration camps (Gonzalez Jr., 1976).

Antisemitism Today

Today, the recovery and preservation of their history is a goal that the Jews in Slovakia are trying to achieve. Throughout centuries, they had been subject to oppression; during the Holocaust attempts were made to exterminate them. During the postwar period, the population was still so desensitized that wrath resulted in pogroms, not only in Slovakia (Cichopek-Gajraj, 2014: 141-143).

Still, throughout the world, Jews have to fight again the increasing phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Physical attacks on members of their community have never ceased. In recent years they have increased in strength in terms of their malignancy and violence. Examples here may be the white supremacist and white nationalist movements in the U.S.A., where even the Klu Klux Klan regains strengths, as well as physical assaults on Jews in Berlin, Germany (Estrin, 2019). The events in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 where a white supremacist crashed his car into a crowd of protesters and thus killed a person, were partly defended by the U.S. president (Coaston,

2019). In Berlin, Germany, young people are exposed to bullying and hate speeches in schools (Angelos, 2019).

Anti-Semitism in Slovakia, and not only there, manifests itself in obvious aggressions as well as in very subtle forms, so that people should be reminded that there is a need of “reading between the lines” concerning publications of this topic or the Holocaust, because too many authors “shroud their stances and opinions in a cloak of words [...], behind which they try to hide their true intentions” (Mešťan, 2017: 133). Since the Jewish community is threatened again by anti-Semitism, which is repeatedly and increasingly displayed in more open forms, Mešťan also brings awareness to the fact that one must go back to its roots:

In the past anti-Semitism was directed at persecuting the hated Jewish community. Persecution of Jews escalated into repeated pogroms, which eventually culminated in a horrific Holocaust. Sometimes it is hidden, other times open and aggressive. The inexperienced younger generation is particularly prone to succumb to it. That is why there is a need to continue to uncover the historical sources of anti-Semitism, that is why there is a need to point to threats of pogroms and a Holocaust, that is why there is a need to document and reveal anti-Semitism in the present day. It is dangerous, it is destructive and in its many consequences inhuman. (Mešťan, 2017: 77)

The former head of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial reported that many survivors of the Holocaust are shocked at how little people have learned from experience and history. The return of anti-Semitism and racism is always perceived as a setback. His recommendations, which can counteract these developments, are a paradigm shift and a better education in school (Morsch, 2018: 4).

The fight against hatred, racism or violence in any form can only be accomplished in a concerted effort. Therefore, it needs people who stand up and speak up. Fighters and protectors are needed again these days. Hopefully they don't have to fight the same way Imi Lichtenfeld, who passed away in January 1998, once had to. During the time on the steam ship *Pentcho*, Lichtenfeld again proved his strength of character. In one incident he did not give up rowing despite an infection. During the emergency surgery a facial nerve was cut, so that his face was partially paralyzed for the rest of his life. The odyssey onboard and afterwards lasted about two years. He then joined the Czechoslovak Legion under British Army command and fought with them in World War II.

Epilogue

During the Second World War, the Jewish cooperation with Britain had advantages, since it also meant that Jewish resistance organizations were supplied with weapons. In addition, those organizations, such as the *Haganah*, were given hope in the fight against the Nazis (Bauer, 1966: 182). Lichtenfeld was granted to move to Israel, called Palestine at that time. Due to his expertise in physical fitness and self-defense tactics, he began to train Israeli troops. Groszman calls it “the irony of fate” that through terror and antisemitic aggressions a personal defense style was invented and shaped that some years later supported the Jewish troops in their fight against the enemy (2017: 28). The developments also shaped Lichtenfeld’s character. After the foundation of the State of Israel he became Chief Instructor for about 20 years. During that time he developed and refined the methods of his self-defense style, today known as *Krav Maga*, meaning “combat contact”, which includes a mixture of several martial arts styles. After his retirement from active duty, he began teaching *Krav Maga* to civilians, opened training facilities in Israel, and served as consultant for security forces. In the 1980s, *Krav Maga* became internationally known after its introduction in the U.S. (Sde-Or and Yanilov, 2001: 225-227). Imi Lichtenfeld still has devoted followers. One of them is Yaron Lichtenstein, whom he trained since Yaron was 14 years old:

I learned from Imi to be a man. I learned from him to speak only the truth. I learned from him to honor other people [...]. I keep the belt [Imi’s black belt] in a safe in a bank in Brazil, because people already tried to steal it, it is very safe now. [...] in one corner of the belt there is a drop of Imi’s blood with his DNA. (Lichtenstein Interview, 2018)

The concept of memory is a common theme in literature, culture, and the movies, expressed in different forms and formats. Today, it seems that there is again an urgent need for our collective memory, as Etela Farkašová writes in her paper concerning memory and the Holocaust:

“We remember in order to live – and again in the same breath (...) in order that we may live more multi-dimensionally, more comprehensively, more fully – and perhaps also more wisely.” (Farkašová, 2013: 15-22)

If we regard this statement as true, then an important question regarding the efforts and achievements of this essay’s protagonist remains open: How can it be that someone who has done so much for the Jewish cause, like Imi Lichtenfeld, is almost forgotten and unknown in many circles? To pursue this question means to undertake further research involving history, psychology, social sciences, and martial arts, with the hope that more sources will be

publicly available. Only in this way can his achievements not be forgotten and his name not disappear from the collective memory.

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Endnotes

¹ It is not clear, which version of the movie was shown on that particular day. *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (original title). Directed by Paul Wegener. Cast: Paul Wegener, Albert Steinrück. Projektions-AG Union (PAGU), Berliner Union-Film AG. Germany, 1920. (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0011237/>)

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