

## **Moshe Bejski and us**

*- Marc Fermont's testimony in memory of Moshe Bejski at the request of Mr. Gabriele Nissim for Gariwo- 5 January 2011*

My name is Marc-Henri Fermont, born on 10.10.1945 in Lyon, younger son of Olga Luwisch and José Fridman (name changed in 1962 into Fermont). My mother Olga Luwisch is a first degree cousin of Erica Eifermann, who became in 1948 the wife of Moshe Bejski with whom she shared his life until she deceased in August 2006, six months before him. Both Erica and Olga were originally from Czernowitz in Bukowina. My mother's native language was German, as Czernowitz was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until 1918.

The relationship which we entertained with Moshe Bejski was dominated by the close relationship which existed between Erica and her cousins. Moshe not only was in love with Erica, but he was also close to her relatives. These links gave me the opportunity to know him well and meet him regularly from 1950 to 2006.

I remember well that I first met Moshe and Erica in Paris when I was four and five, as Moshe studied in Paris and was the chief of "Aliyat Hanoar" or Youth Aliyah in France. My parents' social circle included many "Czernowitzers" who had emigrated and studied in France in the thirties. Moshe did not know French when he came to France in 1949. He told me that his French teacher was the famous German poet from Czernowitz: Paul Celan, who survived the Transistrian concentration camps.

Paul Celan had lived in Paris before the war where he had started medical studies. He went back to Czernowitz before the war and suffered the Jewish ordeal there. It is certainly through Erica's connections that the link between Moshe and Paul Celan was made. Erica used to feed Paul Celan as he was penniless at the time. Paul Celan committed suicide at age fifty by jumping into the Seine. He is now recognized to be a prominent German poet of the twentieth century.

Moshe became fluent in French during his studies and a Francophile as well. Moshe Bejski's Law Doctorate thesis under the title "Les sources des droits de l'homme dans l'Ancien Testament" was inspired by the "Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme" adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The Declaration itself was written by the eminent French Law Professor René Cassin who was very influential at the time. Professor René Cassin was awarded the Peace Nobel Prize in 1968 and is buried in the Pantheon.

After his studies in France, Moshe started a successful career in Israel as a lawyer, a law professor and later as a Judge. His wife Erica was a social worker involved mostly in helping emigrants to adjust to their new lives in Israel. I remember well in 1961 reading in the newspaper "Le Monde" his deposition during the Eichmann trial, where he testified on behalf of the decimated Jewish Polish community.

In 1961, came out the first glimpses of his personal destiny during the war. My mother mentioned then to me that Moshe had been rescued by a German industrialist, but nothing more. We also knew that this German industrialist visited regularly Erica and Moshe in Tel Aviv and that he was a heavy drinker. Otherwise there was a kind of black-out about the true story of Schindler and Moshe's miraculous rescue.

It is only in the early nineties, when Thomas Keneally's book was published that we finally got the whole story. On the other hand, Erica's true story during the war in Czernowitz was never told in any details to us, besides that her family got a special resident permit which protected her. It is remarkable that both Moshe and Erica's lives were rescued by prominent Righteous, namely Oskar Schindler for Moshe and Trajan Popovici, Mayor of Cernauti, for Erica. Trajan Popovici drafted a list of circa 20.000 Jews who survived the Holocaust in their home town. In 1969, Trajan Popovici was recognized by Yad Vashem as a Righteous.

We met also several times Moshe and Erica Bejski in Bad Ragaz near Chur, as they liked to escape the warm Israeli summer to cool off in Switzerland. I realized during those visits that several of their friends of Polish origin, who were probably Schindler's Jews liked to spend their holidays in the same hotel. There was a special complicity and relationship among the survivors of the Holocaust who often enjoyed each other's company.

During the various meetings I had with him in Switzerland, France and Israel, Moshe talked to me often about the Righteous. I heard directly from him the stories of Paul Gruninger Police Chief of St Gallen, Chiune Sugihara, Japanese Consul in Kowno and Aristides de Souza Mendes Consul of Portugal in Bordeaux. I did not realize at the time the systematic work which had been done at Yad Vashem in favor of the Righteous. This became more evident to us when Marie Louise Couttet who sheltered my parents from 1942 to 1944 in her home outside of Lyon was also granted this distinction in 1980. Our family kept a close relation with Marie Louise Couttet until she died in 1985 and we pay tribute to her in the Garden of the Righteous, during our visits to Israel.

In 1979, Moshe Bejski was nominated to Supreme Court of Justice in Jerusalem where he stayed until his retirement in 1991. A major event for us was the first showing of the film Schindler's List on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1994 in Milano, which Moshe and Erica personally attended. They were guests of honor, as it is shown on the photos and in the newspaper articles of the time. Before the film was shown in the evening, there was a press conference in the cinema Odeon where Moshe was subjected to a detailed questioning. One journalist asked Moshe the following question "Is it true that Holocaust survivors were not well received in Israel, when they landed there?" I was shocked and thought the question was indecent. Moshe calmly answered, as if he was prepared to such a question. He said that Israelis were in reality saying to the survivors "How come you survived when my relatives and friends all died?" "How were you able to stay alive, when everybody else we know was murdered?" At the time Moshe Bejski was involved in several European TV programs about the film Schindler's List on RAI, FR2, BBC, ARD.

In Israel, Moshe Bejski got another hour of fame as he presided in the eighties the Supreme Court Commission which bore his name and which investigated in details the wrongdoings of the Israeli Banking sector.

As quoted in the New York Times on May 6<sup>th</sup> 1986 "A Commission investigating a 1983 crash of Israeli bank shares called today for the resignations of the governor of the state bank and top executives of the country's four largest commercial banking chains. The inquiry commission, headed by Supreme Court Justice Moshe Bejski, strongly criticized and indicted the bankers, two former Ministers of Finance and officials at other financial institutions for tolerating the banks' manipulation of their shares on the stock exchange for several years, allowing the shares to rise unrelated to their real value. The crash occurred during a run on foreign currency in October 1983, following rumors of an imminent devaluation of Israeli currency. Investors converted their bank shares into cash to buy dollars and the banks were unable to go on regulating their shares, which crashed. Unquote

Another of his important achievement was the creation of the Holocaust study centre at Massuah in the same kibbutz which he joined in 1947 when he landed in Palestine. The Moshe Bejski Center of Study of the Holocaust inaugurated in 2006 is a vibrant testimony to the work he did during his life to expose the tragedy of the Holocaust and the role of the Righteous.

**In all his activities as an historian, a lawyer and a judge, Moshe Bejski displayed immense qualities of personal conviction, honesty, sense of duty and independence;** He defended staunchly what he believed to be right without paying undue attention to those who were challenging his opinions and judgments. He was altruistic, generous and dedicated to express gratitude to those who helped him and others when they were in need. Therefore his loyal attitude towards Oskar Schindler, his life long support to Massuah at the kibbutz Tel Itzhak, which initially welcomed him when he came to Palestine, his generous support to Emilie Schindler and other Righteous in need. Other Holocaust survivors did not show the same gratitude towards those who had saved their lives during the war. They wanted to forget the anxiety and humiliation they experienced and did not want to be reminded that they owed their lives to courageous rescuers.

Moshe Bejski was a man of duty; he was as well discreet, somehow shy, friendly and unassuming. He never boasted about his significant professional, historical and humanitarian achievements. For Moshe Bejski, the importance of Zionism and the historical role of Israel as a Jewish State were the fundamentals of his personal convictions and values.