

Last update - 10:56 16/04/2007

Beisky's court of the righteous

By Avner Shapira

Before completing work on the film "Schindler's List" in 1993, director Steven Spielberg's secretary phoned Justice Moshe Beisky. She invited him to participate in the filming of the final scene, in which some of the Jews who were rescued in the Holocaust thanks to the efforts of German industrialist Oskar Schindler are seen visiting his grave in Jerusalem, alongside the actors who played them in the film. Beisky, however, turned down the invitation.

He also did not attend the fancy reception Spielberg organized for the survivors of the list who are living in Israel today, and he was careful not to bask in the glory of the famous director, whose successful film brought Schindler's story to the four corners of the world. But it was Beisky, much more so than Spielberg or anyone else, who contributed to recognizing the enterprise of the man who saved 1,200 Jews who were employed in his factory during World War II. When Spielberg's secretary asked him why he did not want to attend the filming, he replied: "It's too late."

"While the film was being produced, Spielberg did not consult with Beisky, although Beisky was the one who did all the research and documented all the testimony of the survivors in the early 1960s. Beisky's notes served as the basis for the book by Thomas Keneally, which in turn served as the basis for the film's script," says Gabriele Nissim, an Italian Jewish journalist and essayist, and the author of the book "Divine Grace: The Story of Moshe Beisky and the Righteous Among the Nations," (translated from the Hebrew) which will be published by Schocken in a few weeks (translated by Arno Bar). During the many conversations he held with Beisky, the former justice told him that he had been somewhat hurt by the fact that Spielberg did not bother to talk to him. Nor did he want to attract attention to himself: "I have always thought that the honor, the memory and the glory belonged only to the Schindlers," Beisky told Nissim.

Beisky, who died early last month at the age of 86, was famous mainly because of his long career as a judge and for being the chair of the government commission of inquiry on the affair of the bank shares. Nissim's book tries to shed light on a lesser known aspect of his life: For decades he worked tirelessly to commemorate the Righteous Among the Nations, aiming to expand the memory of the Holocaust; alongside testimonies

about the engines of destruction and the infinite aspects of evil, Beisky tried to praise those who had risked their lives to save Jews in the Holocaust.

"He never forgot Schindler, who saved him and his two brothers, because the encounter with him in the war not only restored his life but hope and a belief in humanity as well," says Nissim in a phone interview from his home in Milan. "After the bitter experience of Poland under Nazi occupation, after the many demonstrations of anti-Semitism and after childhood friends turned their backs on him and his parents were expelled to a concentration camp, Schindler was the first person who helped Beisky and treated him like a human being rather than an animal."

"For me and for the other prisoners, Schindler was the good German," Beisky is cited as saying in the book. "He was the only one who did not threaten us, the only one a Jew could approach to ask a favor."

Even one person

Nissim's book, which was published in Italy in 2004, made waves and upon its publication Beisky was invited to speak at a special session of the Italian parliament. Since then, the book has also been translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese and Serbo-Croatian. Nissim, who was born in Milan in 1950 to parents from Saloniki who were rescued in the Holocaust, is both a journalist and a television producer. He has done extensive research on the history and the present of the countries of Eastern Europe. His book "The Hidden Jews," dealing with those Jews who remained in these countries after World War II, was translated into Hebrew in 1998.

Starting in the late 1990s, he met with Beisky for a series of conversations, although at first he did not intend to write a book about him. "I wanted to research the beginning of this unique institution within Yad Vashem [The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes Remembrance Authority], which commemorates the Righteous Among the Nations," he says. "I met with Beisky, who told me about his personal involvement in implementing the idea. Although it was already decided in the Yad Vashem Law, passed in the Knesset in 1953, that the institution must deal with commemorating acts of kindness, in practice there was no activity in this area until the early 1960s. During the course of the conversations with Beisky, I understood that I preferred to focus on his own story and his life's work."

Beisky came a long way from Schindler's factory, which was initially located in Krakow and afterward moved to Brunnlitz in occupied Czechoslovakia, to his long-standing activity in Yad Vashem, where he headed the commission for commemorating righteous gentiles for 25 years. The book begins with Beisky's memories of his adolescence in a village near Krakow. He was a

member of the local Zionist youth group and had planned to immigrate to Palestine even before the war. However, he was unable to do so because of health problems. The war changed his plans, and he was imprisoned in the Plaszow labor camp. He managed to escape from there, but he eventually returned to the camp because he couldn't find a safe hiding place.

Later Nissim describes Beisky's experiences in Schindler's factory – an institution based entirely on a lie: Schindler deceived the Nazi authorities when he built a factory that ostensibly was engaged in producing weapons for the war, but in fact did not produce anything. Beisky was a technical draftsman in the factory, and was involved in forging documents and visas. He exploited this talent even after the war, when he forged a document for himself testifying to his being a resident of Palestine, with which he managed to realize his dream and immigrate to the country.

In his book Nissim demonstrates how Beisky's confrontation with the memory of the Holocaust parallels the manner in which Israeli society did or did not deal with this subject. During the 1950s he told almost no one about the horrors to which he had been exposed as a prisoner in the labor camps. The change occurred when he was called to testify at the Eichmann trial in 1961, and from that point onward he devoted himself entirely to the commemorative project.

"When the commission for the commemoration of righteous gentiles was established at Yad Vashem, there was a sharp confrontation between Judge Moshe Landau, who headed it until 1970, and Beisky, who was a member of the commission and eventually replaced him," says Nissim. "Each of them proposed a different answer to the question of who deserved to be recognized as a righteous gentile: Landau was looking for heroes with no flaws, those who not only saved Jews and risked their lives, but could also serve as an example by virtue of their personalities. Beisky, on the other hand, in light of his life experience, was looking for normal people – no heroes and no saints. He wanted to remember those who in the face of extreme injustice sanctioned by the law tried to save even one person."

Schindler is a prominent example of the clash between the two approaches: Landau refused to grant him the Yad Vashem award because two of the survivors on the list had complained that Schindler's motives were practical, and that his factory had previously belonged to their family and was confiscated by Schindler with the help of Nazi anti-Jewish laws. His lifestyle was hedonistic as well, the humiliating manner in which he treated his wife and his pursuit of honor aroused criticism. Nonetheless, Beisky never condemned him and believed all the complaints against him did not outweigh his acts of righteousness. Beisky helped him when he was in financial distress, accompanied him on his visits to Israel, and was his

greatest defender. To the survivors who raised complaints against Schindler he used to reply: "You have to accept Schindler as he is. Had he not been a drinker, a skirt chaser, a spendthrift, disorganized and nonconformist, he could not have rescued us. Only he could have invented the fake factory and continued with the deception until the end." Only in 1993, 19 years after his death, did Yad Vashem recognize Schindler and his wife Emilia as Righteous Among the Nations.

The righteous man must be a criminal

Nissim discusses the paradoxical nature of Beisky's work – on the one hand he was a judge who at the height of his career served on the Supreme Court for 12 years. Yet, on the other hand, he engaged in quasi-legal activity in the Commission for Righteous Gentiles in Yad Vashem. "During the day, when he sat in court, Beisky would rule on the fate of someone who had not obeyed the criminal law, and in the evening, when he sat with the other members of the commission, he would admire the acts of people who defied the laws of the period; because in a period when evil is imposed by law, the righteous person must be a criminal," writes Nissim.

He also shows how Beisky tried to get the members of the commission to discuss cases brought to them without prejudice. For example, it was decided to recognize a Polish prostitute who hid Jews and saved them as a Righteous Gentile, although she sold her body to Nazi officers. The Polish writer Zofia Kossak-Szczucka also merited such recognition, although she held anti-Semitic opinions before the war and even during it. Despite these opinions she called for an end to the apathy of the world with regard to the extermination of the Jewish people, organized an assistance group for Jews and hid Jews who had fled from the ghettos.

For the most part, the recognition as Righteous Gentile is granted to individuals rather than groups or organizations. But among the 21,758 Righteous Gentiles are the Danish people, who as one body received recognition for their righteousness, due to the rescue operation of 7,200 Danish Jews, who were, within in one night, brought to a safe haven in Sweden in the fall of 1943.

An interesting test case that was brought before the commission headed by Beisky featured SS officer Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, who served as a trade attache in the German embassy in Copenhagen. Immediately after finding out about the intention to expel the Jews of Denmark, he turned to senior politicians in the country and warned them. Beisky decided that Duckwitz was worthy of recognition as a Righteous Gentile, because had the warning not come from him – as a German in a senior position – it is likely that the rescue operation would not have been carried out.

Beisky also told Nissim about his many disappointments; for example, when he met Holocaust survivors who for years did not search for their rescuers, or cases in which survivors and authorities did not provide enough medical and financial assistance to Righteous Gentiles who were in difficulty. "He thought that the survivors and Israel as a country had a great moral obligation to do everything possible for them," says Nissim.

In Nissim's opinion, the importance of Beisky's approach does not relate only to the past, but to the future as well: "If we ask what one person can do in totalitarian regimes that use terror on a broad scale, Beisky's view gives room for hope. According to the standards of judge Landau, who is looking for perfect heroes, most human beings are liable to say that they are incapable of doing anything. Beisky's opposite approach demonstrates that a righteous person is not necessarily someone who has performed a major deed that changed the course of history, but even someone who performed small deeds, someone who refused to turn into a criminal and decided to act against the social conventions of his time."

/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=848767

[close window](#)