

Noémi W. Munkácsi: Isaac Pfeiffer, the man

To the holy memory of a friend who was more than a relative

He is one of those who was hardly earthly, his material body was only the living space of his great soul. His fate was tragic doom of the whole Hungarian Jewish people. He was born on 29th May 1881. and died on 3rd May 1945. in Dachau concentration camp after pogroms and blood accusations during his life. Between these two dates he is a Jewish rabbi, poet and scientist but at the same time a simple man.

His life started on Savout of 1881 in the village Ács in Komárom-county. The child, born on the celebration day of the Word became really engaged with the Word. In the house of his father, Mór Pfeiffer - director of Pápa Jewish school – he imbibed not only spirit of culture-orthodox but drug of letters. He and his sisters played church stories already in the children's room. In his early childhood he started writing poems, if he had some ideas of poem lines during the day, his sisters – who loved him - kept those lines in their memory till evening when he could write it down.

He studied in Benedictine grammar school then in Calvinist college., where he won literature competitions of self-education study circle several times. One time he was respected very much, because he could write his poem in the high-memory record book where Petőfi's handwriting could be seen..

Spirit of the age and genius loci set up for him Hungarian ideals as Kossuth, Petőfi and later Ady, as well as the life of Herzl during the years after maturity, when he was a student of Jeshiva of Kiskunhalas then Pozsony. This was a heresy among students of Szimcha B. Szófér so Isaac Pfeiffer the spiritual leader of the young came under fire from the side of Protesting rabbis. But Vienna was not far and spirit of Herzl was already alive in him. And when the shocking news of death shook up the world, the little-money (poor) Jeshiva-bocher sold his ring he had got for his Bar Mitzvah in order he could go to the burial

From Pozsony Jeshiva the way to Budapest rabbi-seminary and university was hard, where he was a favourite student of Bacher és Goldzieher. His name can be found also among founders of Makkabea the pioneers of Hungarian Zionism.

His doctoral dissertation, published in 1911 shows feature of a scientist. At that time he was already a melancholic, unbalanced, disengaged man. Later his combative fate verified his farsightedness.

He worried about Hungarian-Jewish incidents. „*We are going towards blind future*” – wrote in his poem, dedicated for Patai. „*What will we become? How does future change us? Death march is being made for us.*”.

He was invited to be a rabbi at Stockholm in summer 1914, but barriers were closed. His stations of rabbi were: Sümeg, Pécs, Monor, opportunities of his profession were limited. „*Thousands of pain reach me – everyone hurts but nobody protects me*” – he wrote – he found peace only in his church-clean family life.

Only few people could understand him, as those ones who are before their age.

Beyond his rabbi profession he was a fighting journalist. His brave-sound articles were often published in denominational and daily newspapers.

He was a real teacher at school and at rostrum, his speeches had the feature of conscious art improvisation. That's why he was overcome by truthful fire at rostrum several times.

He saw Hungarian public life with eyes of a man of wide intellectual horizon.: „*New winds blow to Hungarian trees, looking forward to new Hungarian miracles.*” – he wrote it together with the poet of Ady in the daily newspaper of Sümeg at beginning of the twenties, upon which he was considered as a communist.

He was already on the eve of declining years. Promise word of the life the „forever debtor” is less and less strong.. „*Far is farther and farther*” – „*Everyone reaches goal one time but you missed the goal every time*” blamed himself for his fate.

And fatal years of Jewish fate came: „*If they don't kill us we still die ... -the sick trees are killed by worms – eaten by wood-borers*”

In peace-seeming years of 30s in a cheerful Jewish dance-party voice of Cassandra screamed dreadfully: : „*Don't you know that dancing on top of gunpowder barrels? She nearly feels the fate: „I see flame, fire, bloody – sword, knife, which is sharp – houses are on fire, roofs destroyed , human bodies are dying.*”

Our correspondence started at that time and continued till the end. Tone of it showed unavoidable fulfillment of the catastrophe.

Come true

At the time of ghettos in Monor, he was the first who gave his flat voluntarily, only wanted to save his library.

He was working on catalogue of his library and translation of psalm for IMIT BIBLE quietly when he was carried to Kolumbusz camp during save-attempt of Ottó Komoly.

Discipline, wise belief in God characterized him there, too. He was stolen of everything but was happy that he still had got his Bible. He became rabbi of the camp and the weak, thin man nearly became a prophet, His old word got true: „*Who has got no father no mother, - brother, friend leave him – but I give thousand times more love instead of them*”.

1944. Kol nidre eve commenced for the Jewish, left in Pest and last time he said the Word from the rostrum of the church of Rumbach street: „*Do you know where I'm coming from? – I'm bringing the Word to you from horror of brick factories, from terror of death camps: GOD IS ALIVE! Alive in purifying fire of torments, in souls of thousands of martyrs, who die with his name on their lips...*”

Did he guess his fate would soon be the same as martyrs’

On 25th October the arrow-cross soldiers carried off him from the flat of his relatives. From this time only eyewitnesses could recall his declining life. Lepsény, Veszprém, Komárom – following stations of his martyr way.

Zionist boys, dressed in party-service clothes tried to escape him but he didn't accept privilege of individual run away. In Komárom also the clothes what he wore was taken away. That time – so witnesses said – his convincing, quiet voice attained the bandits and they gave his coat back.

„Haftling” in striped clothes of Dachau death camp is the final earthly memory of Isaac Pfeiffer. He did also the hardest work. He was exemplary in this as well as in his preserved clean appearance, which was a feature in his whole life. Also there, among unimaginable dreads of misery he was a „RICH MAN” of treasure of love, who was giving, always giving to his fellow-man. „*If you are afraid, I'm praying for you – bringing light in darkness - ...giving you my lot of treasure, richness. Who loves, pities me for it?Who receives me in his heart?...*”

With hopeful words, chasid-legends he gave strength to his fellows who thought they would survive for his merit . „*Finally also Auschwitz leads to resurrection. We must suffer because the Jewish left the way, determined by history and didn't recognise time.*”. He said also there, as he did during his whole life, that only return to people could bring rebirth.

It was spring of 1945. Last terrible months of Nazi-terror lived its impotent rage. Melt snow was falling on the poor beds through holes of rotten rafters of Dachau camp. „It will be spring, we'll be rescued...Isaac Pfeiffer might dream it on a bed. Suddenly he woke up. Somebody was searching for his piece of bread under his head. He took the hand of the thief but had to let it go. He felt sharp pain. The miserable thief pricked his arm. ...

With his injury he got to the Revier hospital in defence of a honest doctor from Szatmárnémeti. But help of the doctor was late. He lost his strength. He got phlegmone then typhus. But he still believed in escape. „We go home!...” he said in feverish dream. „God wouldn't let a man die whose work wasn't finished yet”. „My Lord I'm dying but nothing has been finished yet”. We nearly heart his final thought.... On 1st May Dachau camp got free, but the news reached only a dying man: „I said we go home, didn't I?” he said quietly.

On 3rd May 1945. on 20 of Iyar Isaac Pfeiffer, Jewish priest and poet finished his life with unfulfilled fate of Nebo-hill. His life is an exemplification for the future generations, we – who knew him – feel his figure

– which is moving away in time – closer and closer to us. His rabbi education, human word are our travelling companions for ever.

László Dömötör: The last rabbi of Monor

(Selections from the article, published in weekly newspaper New Life on 15th January 1966.)

An interesting document was found in a private collection from the sad year of 1944. The letter immortalizes confession of faith - can be nearly considered as political testament – of the learnt, educated, humanist rabbi of the Monor vall religious community, dr. Isaac Pfeiffer. The high-educated, special-learned rabbi of the several hundred years old religious community was also a well-known poet as Isaac Pap.

When in 1944 summer the ghetto was created in Monor and the Jewish were moved together, an interesting story happened in this village near to Pest. Dr. Dezső Fónyad Calvinist pastor– in the menatime he died - the Catholic and the Lutheran priests went to Bajor gendarme major who directed deportations. They asked him not to carry dr. Isaac Pfeiffer to the ghetto. They promised upon their priest honour that the rabbi won't escape. The gendarme major referred to a higher order and refused the request, moreover threatened the members of delegation that he would report them to László Baký , the full-authorized under-secretary of Ministry of Home Affairs.

Sad events followed each other quickly. The Jewish were deported to the brick factory of Monor, including the rabbi of the religious community. Within some weeks trains started going to death camps. The Jewish community of Monor was completely killed out. (...). The memory of the high-respected, gentle personality rabbi is still alive in community of Monor town. (...)

Dr. Isaac Pfeiffer wrote in his last letter – among others - : „*With sad heart I feel that we all will be destroyed. But it causes more pain that under the German boots also the Hungarian may be destroyed. I'm truly jealous of the brave man Endre Bajcsy Zsilinszky, who received people of Gestapo with bullets. But no everybody can be so brave. I belive and confess that martyrdom of the Hungarian Jewish people will create bases of a more humane.*

I'm not embittered. Some time ago the Calvinist priest came to me and said he had wote a letter to László Endre for me. I thanked for his kindness but thanked much more for that he prayed for persecuted Jewish poeple – becomingly to his bravery – on the morning church service. But also in this sad camp we find honest people. In the last days gendarme officers were replaced and the new commander – I don't know his grade, he must be a sub-officer – invited me to his office. We had an interesting talk. He said: „Mister rabbi, you looks like an honest man. Next morning exactly at 10 o'clock I'll order the guards on briefing in my office. You can escape nobody will chase.” Then he let me go away. But I didn't escape I couldn't leave there those poor people, whose spiritual leader was me. I couldn't leave also the tradition-rich religious community of Monor , I must have been the last rabbi of it...” (...)

Dr. Isaac Pfeiffer and every member of his family was killed, except his son, who is now a leader doctor of one of the hospitals of Tel-Aviv.(...) Words of the high-respected, scientist rabbi came true, he was really the last rabbi of the religious community of Monor.