

The Sonnenfelds – printers of Oradea

The Nazi Counterfeit plot

Generations of the Sonnenfeld family grew up in Oradea and built one of the most respected, high-quality, printing firms in Europe. It is still possible today to find for sale on E-bay, early 20th Century prints produced by the Sonnenfeld printing presses of Oradea.

Today, in Oradea, it is also possible to see where the printing took place in Moscovei Street where Adolf Sonnenfeld had built the first Secession house in Oradea in 1912.



Adolf Sonnenfeld 1861 – 1918, the father of Andor, Gusztav and Patya

The printing house was built in the inner area of this fine building as seen in the early part of the Twentieth Century.





And more recently

The Sonnenfelds were Jewish and the restrictions imposed by anti-Jewish laws in the late 1930's and the early 1940s severely damaged their business. But worse was to follow as the German occupation of Hungary led, in 1944, to the internment of the family in the Oradea ghetto and their subsequent deportation to Auschwitz. Most of the family perished in the gas chambers.

But three family members survived because of their knowledge of printing and one was still able to tell the remarkable story of how the German Reich secretly planned to destroy the financial systems of the Allies through counterfeit money. Their story was made into an award-winning film (*The Counterfeiters*, 2007) and a book (*Krueger's Men & the National Debt* by Lawrence Malkin).

Abraham Sonnenfeld, son of Andor, visited Oradea this summer (2012) and spent many hours talking about his memories with Emilia Teszler from Asociatia Tikvah. They went on an extensive tour of Oradea seeing all those sites personal to Abraham.



Abraham was 86 at the time of his visit, but had very clear memories of the events which took him from Oradea to Auschwitz in 1944 and his discussions with Emilia have been combined with his earlier interview, published in the Jewish magazine Mishpacha, to produce the fascinating story told below.

To Auschwitz

Abraham recalls having to wear the yellow star and then being imprisoned early in 1944 inside the main ghetto in Oradea (in the Ullmann Palace). Then about a month later at the beginning of June 1944 he was transported with his family in cattle trucks to Auschwitz. There, his stepmother, his aunt, cousin and sister were all sent by Dr Joseph Mengele on the path to the gas chambers. It was the last he ever saw of them.

Abraham with his father and uncle were chosen to go on forced labour to an Austrian quarry, but before leaving the Germans asked whether there were any prisoners with knowledge of printing and, if so, for them to step forward. This they did and this action saved the Sonnenfeld men as none of their friends who were taken on forced labour survived.

Abraham was taken to a print shop which had been set up in a secret site in Auschwitz and there he was tested to see if he really knew how to operate the presses.

At the time, the Sonnenfelds had no idea what the Germans had in mind for them, nor did they have any idea how to convince the Germans that they really

knew how to operate printing machinery. Abraham had only done vacation work in the Oradea print shop and his father and uncle ran the business rather than operate the machinery. But the German task, which was to print a greetings card, was rather short and superficial so that the combined experience of the family enabled them to pass the test. It helped that the German supervisors appeared to know very little as well.

Abraham spent his time cleaning the machinery and giving the appearance of printing knowledge.

The group of printers left Auschwitz the same way they had come — by train. His father and uncle, who had arrived at Auschwitz wearing the medals they had acquired for their service in World War I, left it, like all the rest, in striped prisoners' pyjamas. Unlike their arrival at Auschwitz, this time they had a seat in the train, but they were heavily guarded by SS Officers.

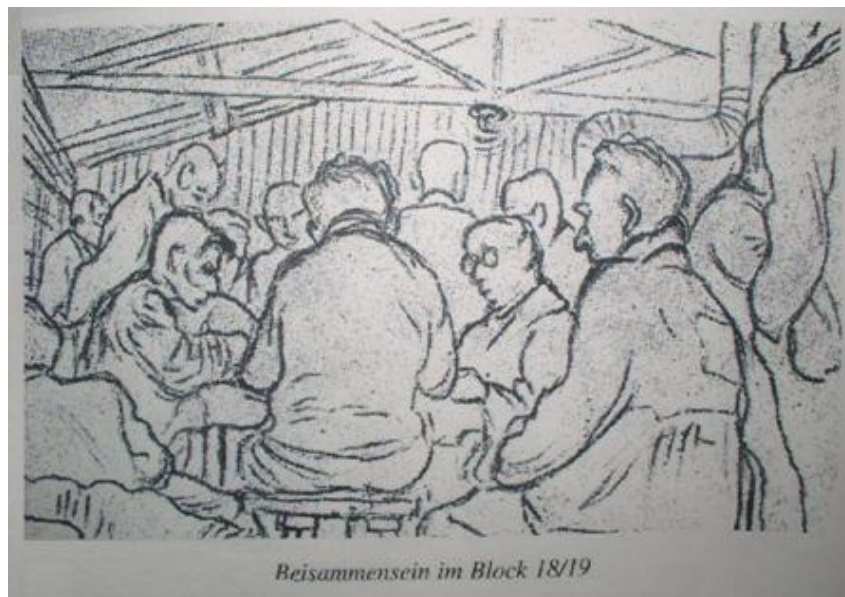
To Sachsenhausen

After a long train journey, they eventually arrived at Camp Sachsenhausen close to Berlin and which was “home” to some 8,000 prisoners. They were housed in Barracks 18 and 19, in a special barbed wire area, totally isolated from the rest of the prisoners.



Camp Sachsenhausen

It was at this camp that they learned the purpose of their relocation: Operation Counterfeit. The project was so well-guarded that even the SS officers in the camp knew nothing about it. Only those who kept watch over Barracks 18 and 19 had the inside information. It became evident that Bernhard Krueger, the SS officer supervising them, had chosen only Jews for the tasks ahead.



A drawing by Leo Hess. The boy to the left is Abraham and the large back facing us is that of his father Andor.

We do not have a picture of Abraham's father Andor at this time but his uncle Gusztav, is pictured below.



Krueger was experienced in forgery. He had already forged British postage stamps with anti-Jewish and anti-Soviet messages, helped by prisoners from occupied European countries, including Jews. But this new counterfeit money was to be produced exclusively by Jews.

Abraham recalled that they were treated fairly decently and they slept on beds rather than on bunk boards and ate relatively good food — though by the end of the war, he still weighed less than 95 lbs. If someone became ill, that person was removed, supposedly to the infirmary or hospital but Abraham says they knew that they were killed, because the Nazis couldn't afford to risk any information leaking out.

Krueger would address them by the formal and polite German *Sie*, instead of the familiar and demeaning *du* (mainly reserved for servants and Jews under the Nazis) as he expected them to co-operate and work well with him. However, if they stepped out of line, he threatened them with death.

The counterfeit project

The counterfeit project was complex, requiring the right paper, making a watermark, preparing printing plates and breaking the special code which the British used for serialising the numbers on their banknotes. But by the end of the war, the Germans had succeeded in forging some nine million notes, with a face value amounting to 135 million pounds Sterling. The forgery was so close to perfect that the notes were hardly distinguishable from the real thing. Many notes found their way into circulation.

The Nazi's original intention was simply to release huge numbers of notes over British skies, knowing that people wouldn't be able to resist using them as good cash. This scheme never materialised because, in 1943, with the war not going their way, the Nazis needed the money for more pressing purposes such as importing strategic raw materials and paying their spies. It is said that some of this money may also have gone to finance the rescue from imprisonment of the deposed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in September 1943.

Survival

When Abraham came to work on the counterfeit project, the team were almost finished with the British pound notes and were beginning to produce US dollars. However, they had a serious technical problem with the dollar and in an attempt to make a breakthrough, the Nazis brought a new forger to the camp, a Russian Jew named Salomon Smolianoff, but he also failed to solve the problem.

Abraham said that often their work was not particularly professional and he believes there was also some sabotage on the part of the printers. Being the youngest, he was left out of most of the intrigue. But he is clear that one of their

group supervised the work and made sure that they were not so efficient so that they would no longer be needed or too inefficient so as to be replaced.

There has been subsequent talk about the counterfeiters being determined to sabotage the Nazi war effort, but Abraham personally did not have any experience of that and in his mind they were all there with one purpose and that was to survive.

According to Abraham it was naïve to think that if the group had succeeded in printing dollars, the Nazis would have won the war. At the stage that he joined the group they knew that the Nazis were losing and that it was only a matter of time before the Allies took over. They were worried that the worse the Nazis were doing, the more likely they were to be killed.

When the Allied forces approached Sachsenhausen, the team of printers were transferred to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. They were loaded on open train carriages, together with all the machinery, without any indication as to where they were headed. So long as they remained together with the crates and machines, they felt safe and optimistic. When they got close to Mauthausen, this optimism disappeared, since they knew that this was no labour camp; it contained the gas chambers meant for annihilation.

Ebensee

At the very last moment, just before the SS was about to round up the group and liquidate them — they were miraculously saved. The officers in charge decided to transfer them to Ebensee, an Austrian sub-camp of Mauthausen, constructed with underground tunnels and chambers for special clandestine projects, such as the development of missiles and the production of counterfeit money.



Ebensee underground tunnel

The SS officers had only one truck for the transportation of the printers to Ebensee, and had to do the transporting in three shifts. On the third trip, the driver, who knew the Allies were getting close and didn't want to be caught, poured motor oil into the gas tank so that the engine seized. The guards, however, made the prisoners march there on foot. One part of this group did not keep pace with the rest and by the time they caught up, the guards had fled, leaving them to their own resources.

When they finally arrived at Ebensee, the Jews, who had already seized control there, at first wouldn't let them in. They looked too good to them, too well fed, too clean and they refused to believe they were Jews. However, they were eventually let in and it was only two days later when they were liberated by the Allies along with the rest of the 16,000 Jewish prisoners in the camp.



Krueger, the SS man responsible for the counterfeit operation remains a figure of controversy. After the war, he was caught and interrogated by the French and the

British. He was sent back to Germany and stood trial in 1950, but was exonerated since a number of Jewish survivors testified that he had saved their lives. He lived in Frankfurt as a respected citizen, working in the actual paper company that had supplied the paper for the forgeries, and he died in 1989. Others testified that Krueger had personally shot a number of the Jews involved in the counterfeit operation.

Hidden treasure

With defeat staring them in the face, the Nazis packed up all their equipment, including printers' plates and counterfeit bills, into crates which they dumped into Lake Toplitz, the deepest, most isolated lake in Austria.



Forged bank notes retrieved from the bottom of Lake Toplitz in Austria

Toward the end of the war, they also cast chests of Nazi gold into its depths, gold which they had looted from conquered European countries. Ever since the end of the war, there have been treasure hunters which included both Krueger, the SS man and Burger, the leading printer. One search party succeeded in dredging up chests of counterfeit money with a face value of millions of British pounds, from the depths of the lake.



In 2005, the Austrian government hired an American company of treasure divers to search for the gold purported to be sunken there; it has been working on the project ever since.

One search party found, among other things, a chest containing a list with the names of the 143 Jews who worked on the counterfeiting project. The name 'Sonnenfeld' appeared three times.

Return to Oradea

Abraham, his father and uncle returned to Oradea in 1945 and recovered their print shop, but did not recommence the business. In 1948, after his father died, Abraham emigrated to Israel, married and had a family.

In 2009 Abraham was invited to accompany an Israeli Military Delegation to Auschwitz.



Abraham Sonnenfeld takes the salute of the Israeli Military Delegation at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2009 having returned for the first time after 65 years

The video of the event is available at <http://www.tvclip.biz/video/ttYsMC-TJhg/back-in-auschwitz-birkenau-after-65-years.html#>

Abraham was the youngest member of the 143 Jews who worked in the counterfeit operation. He was 86 when he made his final visit to Oradea the city which had so many mixed memories for him. He was probably the last survivor with personal experience of a German counterfeit master plan to save the Third Reich.

Abraham died in July 2012 in Israel.



1929



1933



1936



1942



1970



1960



1949



1945



1980



1990



2002



2005



2012