

Jackie Jakubowski writes about Gilel Storch

Jackie Jakubowski writes about Gilel Storch, who used unconventional methods to save thousands of Jews in the final months of World War II.

In the midst of raging war and the annihilation of Europe's Jews in the fall of 1942, the Latvian refugee Gilel Storch visited Gösta Engzell, the head of the Legal Department of the Swedish Foreign Ministry. Their conversation dealt with the situation of Jewish people in parts of Europe occupied by Nazi Germany.

Engzell was initially skeptical of Storch's information. However, it seemed to confirm information in a report from the Swedish diplomat Göran von Otter, who was stationed in Berlin. He had sent an account of his meeting with the Waffen SS officer Kurt Gerstein, who had witnessed the fatal gassing of people in a German concentration camp in Poland. From the summer of 1942 the Swedish Foreign Ministry received several similar reports of mass deportations of Jews.

After his meeting with Storch, Engzell briefly noted in a memorandum: "... he reported that according to what he had heard some fifty Jews had been gassed to death." The information was so astonishing that it was difficult to believe. How could it be possible to gas to death a large number of defenseless men, women, and children?

Gilel Storch (1902–1983) was a successful Latvian entrepreneur who had become a reliable supplier of agricultural chemicals to Sweden. As a result, he possessed well-placed business contacts in Sweden who helped him obtain a 6-day business visa to Sweden in July 1940, just as the Soviets invaded Latvia. In April 1941, through contacts with the then state secretary of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Tage Erlander, he managed to acquire residency permits in Sweden for himself, his wife, and his daughter and separately was able to arrange safe passage for them on May 21, 1941. This was his wife's and daughter's salvation. The mass annihilation of Jews in the Baltic states started about six weeks later. Many members of Storch's large family were among the victims.

On July 1, 1941, German troops occupied the capital of Latvia, where they were greeted as liberators in what had been a Soviet-occupied republic. Mass executions started days later. And in Riga that fall, a ghetto surrounded by barbed wire was created to isolate 30,000 Jews. A short time later, an additional 25,000 were killed in two days of mass executions in the ghetto and in the forests outside Riga. Latvian volunteers enthusiastically participated in the murder of their Jewish neighbors. The head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler – third in line in the Nazi hierarchy and the man in charge of carrying out the Holocaust – was nevertheless not satisfied with the slow tempo at which 78 percent of Latvia's Jewish population was killed.

Gilel Storch lobbied politicians, Swedish Foreign Ministry officials, and influential business contacts to disseminate information about what was going on in their

neighboring country and about opening borders to Jewish refugees. He was perceived as bothersome, with his heavy-handed attempts at persuasion

His lobbying got him nowhere. As the war and the mass murders continued, time was running out to save those facing death in extermination camps and on innumerable fields of death in the Baltics, as well as across Europe. He and his like-minded colleagues decided to take action, using unconventional methods.

Realizing the enormous resources needed for large-scale rescue attempts, Storch decided to become a representative of the Jewish Agency's Rescue Committee and he established and was the driving force of the Swedish Section of the World Jewish Congress.

Gilel Storch worked with these platforms and would come to play a crucial role in saving Jewish people in the final months of the war. The Nazi leaders began to realize that Germany was losing the war, and many therefore sound out the possibility of using surviving Jews as hostages of sorts for ransom, in order to flee to South America and the Middle East (with help from the Vatican and Syria, among others).

Storch was emboldened by rumors that it would be possible, with the right contacts and large amounts of capital, to purchase the freedom of these people facing death: Adolf Eichmann had proposed Blut gegen Waren (Blood for Goods) – 10,000 truckloads for a million Jewish lives: a hundred Jews for one truckload. Heinrich Himmler, too, who had hoped until the bitter end for a separate peace agreement with the Western powers, was prepared to release 2,000 Latvian Jews for a ransom of two million Swedish crowns. (The historian Yehuda Bauer treats this subject in his book *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945*.)

Gilel Storch shifts – to use Lena Einhorn's words in her award-winning biography and TV documentary – from being “a traveling salesman in chemicals and sheep intestines” to being a “traveling salesman in lives.” He was forced to act in violation of the Western Allies' decision not to negotiate with Nazi Germany until after the Third Reich had been vanquished. War efforts on the front were the top priority.

Storch harbored no such misgivings. To save lives, he was prepared to “negotiate with the devil” if he had to, and do so right away.

Storch's and his associates' activities were prodigious. When nearly all Danish Jews were rescued across the Straits of Öresund in 1943, the Swedish section of the WJC worked in the periphery as mediator of contacts between Jewish institutions in Stockholm and the Danish Resistance. Storch and his colleagues were also involved in the rescue efforts on behalf of Hungarian Jews. In March 1944, the Swedish section of the WJC was one of the actors behind the decision to send Raoul Wallenberg to Budapest to help those facing death.

After receiving reports in mid-1944 of the horrendous conditions in concentration camps, Storch also worked to have food provisions delivered to camps and distributed

to inmates. Storch purchased 40,000 food packets that were directly distributed among concentration camp prisoners. Count Folke Bernadotte, at the Red Cross, gave his support, and the War Refugee Board, impressed with Storch's accomplishment, allocated to Storch approximately 30,000 to 40,000 additional food packets for him to distribute.

Storch contacted the Swedish government with the demand that Jewish prisoners also be included in Bernadotte's rescue activities, which originally were intended for non-Jewish, Scandinavian prisoners. The answer was no.

When Storch heard rumors that Hitler intended to blow up all concentration camps, both the prisoners and the buildings, he realized he had to give his all in order to prevent even more deaths. He set in action a complicated scheme that included him making the acquaintance of the Estonian-born German-Baltic masseur Felix Kersten, who had close contact with Heinrich Himmler.

In late February 1945, Storch was introduced to Kersten by the representative of Dresdner Bank in Scandinavia, Ottokar von Knierim, from Riga. (von Knierim was also the uncle of Olof Palme who, at seventeen, was present at this consequential meeting.)

Himmler and Kersten had developed a relationship of mutual dependency: Kersten's ability to alleviate Himmler's chronic stomach pains gave the masseur a degree of influence that could be utilized to intervene on behalf of imprisoned friends and patients.

Storch's next move was, together with Kersten, to formulate an agreement between Himmler and the WJC representative including demands to, among other things, nullify Hitler's concentration camp order, dispatch food and medicine to Jews in Germany, forbid abuse of concentration camp prisoners, and release 20,000 Jewish prisoners to Sweden and Switzerland.

Folke Bernadotte representing the Red Cross, also took part in this stage of the rescue efforts.

Kersten traveled to Berlin in early March 1945 and returned to Sweden toward the end of March, with attestations from Himmler for Storch, that camps would be surrendered in an orderly manner to the Allies, further killing of Jews would cease, and prisoners, not to be evacuated, would be permitted to receive food parcels. In addition, Kersten conveyed that Himmler was willing to negotiate other demands – directly with Gilel Storch. Himmler hoped to be able to obtain promises that the Allies would cease their bombing of German cities for two months.

This positive breakthrough, with additional requests from Storch, persuaded the Swedish government to expand the White Bus mandate to include not only non-Scandinavians, but also Jews.

However, the trip to Berlin ultimately did not come about for Storch, for several possible reasons including his wife's fears. With only two hours' notice, a young activist in the Swedish section of the WJC, Norbert Masur, undertook the risky assignment on April 21, 1945. (He recounts his trip in the book *My Meeting with Heinrich Himmler*.)

The negotiation between Himmler, Kersten, and Folke Bernadotte ultimately also led to the release of some 20,000 survivors to Sweden, either on the Red Cross's White Buses – most of them from Bergen Belsen, some one thousand women from the refugee camp in Ravenbrück, and about 500 Jews from the concentration camp in Teresienstadt (Intervju med Gilel Storch, (Interview with Gilel Storch) *Judisk Krönikan* (Jewish Chronicle) 1/1981).

Those around Storch could often perceive him as undiplomatic, uncompromising, and stubborn, with an uncommon power to persuade others, despite his imperfect command of the Swedish language. British diplomats – with whom he negotiated about increased quotas for immigration to Palestine for Jewish people fleeing the Nazis – characterized him as “overbearing and crazy.”

But such qualities were apparently necessary in a time and in a world where civil courage was in short supply and where every life was worth an entire humanity.

Gilel Storch died in 1983. He was buried, at his request, among the many concentration camp survivors who died soon after their arrival in Sweden in 1945.

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From Swedish. Donald MacQueen