



Memory & Action

Hannah Szenes: The Young Poet and Parachutist Who Risked Her Life to Help Fellow Jews during World War II



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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**“I gambled on
what mattered most,
the dice were cast.”**



Before leaving for a perilous mission into Nazi-occupied Hungary, Hannah Szenes handed a piece of paper to her comrade. It contained a poem, which she wanted him to keep in case she never returned.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.

Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honor's sake.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

These words foreshadowed Hannah's readiness to sacrifice herself to help Jewish people under threat by Nazi Germany.

Beginnings in Budapest

Hannah was born to a Jewish family in Budapest, Hungary, in 1921. Her father, Béla Szenes, was an acclaimed poet and playwright. After he died when Hannah was not quite six, her mother, Katalin, raised Hannah and her

brother, Gyuri. Hannah embraced her father's passion for writing and started a diary when she was a young teen.



Hannah Szenes playing in a park in Budapest, Hungary, circa 1926. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Beit Hannah Senesh

Hannah excelled at school. It was also where she began to experience overt antisemitism. When she was elected as an officer of her school literary society in 1937, her classmates at the Protestant private school called for another election. Hannah knew it was because she was Jewish.

This was a reflection of her country's political climate. In 1938, Hungary began to enact a series of anti-Jewish laws, similar to the racist laws in Germany. Eventually, Hungarian Jews were excluded from most professions and were forbidden to marry non-Jews.

Around this time, Hannah began to more closely identify with her Jewish identity and started studying Hebrew. In a diary entry from October 27, 1938, she wrote, “I don’t know whether I’ve already mentioned that I’ve become a Zionist. This word stands for a tremendous number of things. To me it means, in short, that I now consciously and strongly feel I am a Jew and am proud of it. My primary aim is to go to Palestine, to work for it.”

In September 1939, just after the outbreak of World War II, Hannah arrived in Palestine, which was under British rule at the time.

In Palestine, Hannah’s life was vastly different from the culturally rich urban life she left behind. She attended an agricultural school, where she lived in basic conditions while farming and caring for animals. She later moved to a kibbutz.



It was during this time she wrote one of her most famous poems, “A Walk to Caesarea,” also called “Eli, Eli” meaning “My God, My God,” which a composer set to music and is today a famous song:

*My God, my God,
may it never end –
the sand and the sea,
the rustle of the water,
the lightning of the sky,
the prayer of man.*

While she loved her new home, Hannah could not forget the people she left behind in Europe and grew increasingly concerned for her family. After a little more than three years in Palestine, in early 1943 she was — in her words — “suddenly struck by the idea of going to Hungary.” She wanted to find a way to help Jews still living there, and to try to get her mother out of Europe.

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Answering a Call

In February 1943, Hannah learned that a special unit was being organized to go on a mission behind enemy lines. She volunteered for the British Army.



Hannah with her brother, Gyuri Szenes, in British-controlled Palestine, February 1944. Gyuri survived the Holocaust. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Beit Hannah Senesh

Hannah was selected to be a parachutist, along with other volunteers, three women and 29 men, to gather intelligence, help rescue Allied pilots, and try to help save Jews.

After training in Egypt, she and a few men parachuted into partisan territory in Yugoslavia, near the Hungarian border, in March 1944. Her plan was to rescue Jews from Hungary and transport them through Yugoslavia to Italy, and then on to safety in Palestine.

However, just days after they landed, the paratroopers learned that Nazi Germany had invaded and occupied Hungary. Hannah was crushed that the window for their mission had closed. Her fellow parachutist Reuven Dafne said it was the first time he saw Hannah cry — when they heard the news “we came too late.”

They worked with local partisans in Yugoslav territory for several months, until Hannah prepared to cross the border into Hungary under an assumed, non-Jewish identity. She knew it was risky, but Reuven recalled she was adamant and told him, “Even if they catch me, at least it will be known to the Jews that somebody tried to get to them. At least they’ll know that they aren’t completely abandoned.”

In June 1944, after handing off her poem “Blessed Is the Match” to Reuven, she made the crossing.

Within hours, Hungarian authorities discovered her.

Her Final Months

When Hannah was captured, the authorities also found her radio transmitter. Despite being tortured, she never revealed the codes to the transmitter, which would have allowed her enemies to communicate with the partisans.

She was transferred to a prison in Budapest, where she was held for five months. In an effort to get Hannah to talk, the authorities even brought her mother to the prison. Katalin was shocked because she thought Hannah was still in Palestine. But Hannah never broke.

In one of her last poems, composed in prison, she wrote:

“But death, I feel, is very near. I could have been 23 next July; I gambled on what mattered most, the dice were cast. I lost.”

She was convicted of treason and executed by firing squad on November 7, 1944. In 1950, she was reburied in Israel.



Israeli soldiers carry the coffin of Hannah Szenes along the beach before it is transported to Jerusalem for burial, 1950. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Israel Government Press Office

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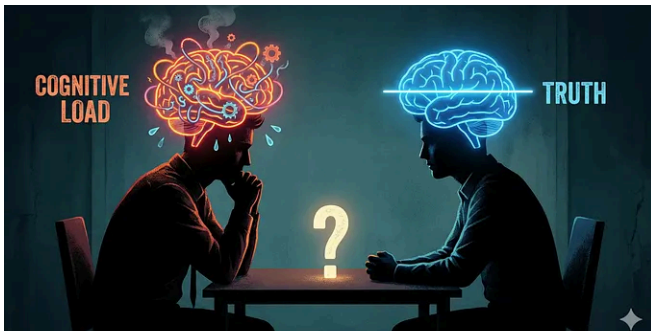
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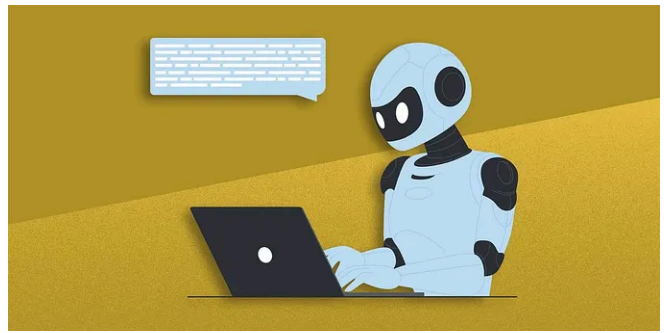


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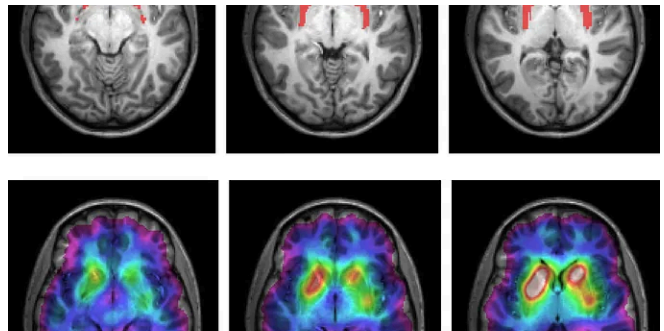


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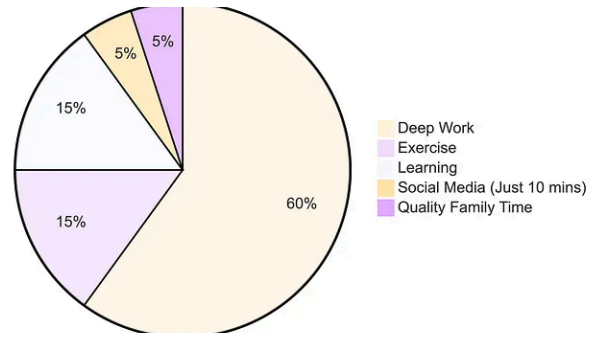


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