The waste and the redemption

ALEXANDER ZVIELLI

Why recall an old controversy that for over 50 years intensified hate and divided Jews into two bitter camps, slandering each other? A Jewish Kapo in Auschwitz, a well-written and documented biography of Eliezer Gruenbaum, the Communist Jewish kapo at Auschwitz, proves that it was important to convey to us the whole truth, no matter how bitter, of this conflict which still continues to separate Jews today. Tuvia Friling, professor of Modern History at Ben-Gurion University, offers us an all-embracing and fair presentation of some of the painful pages of our history.

Yitzhak Gruenbaum (1879-1970) was the leader of Polish Jewry, the organizer of the Bloc of Minorities in the Polish parliament, a General Zionist, member of the Zionist Executive, chairman of the World War II Jewish Agency’s Rescue Committee and interior minister in the provisional government of Israel in 1948-1949.

His son, Eliezer, born in Warsaw in 1909, was educated in “Tarbut,” a Polish-Hebrew Zionist school. A former member of Hashomer Hatzair, he became a Communist and was sentenced to four-and-half years in Polish prison. After two years in jail, due to his mother Miriam’s connections he was granted leave to recuperate and was spirited out of Poland, through Czechoslovakia, to study in France. In 1938, he joined the Spanish International Brigade to fight the fascists and upon his return was interned in France, but his mother again secured his release.

Eliezer earned a degree in law and worked as a journalist. At the outbreak of World War II, he volunteered for the French army, but was rejected, and joined the Polish Sikorski brigade instead. After the fall of France in 1940, he refused to be evacuated to England, and joined the French underground. Caught by French police, he arrived in July, 1942, under the name of Leon Berger, in Auschwitz-Birkenau and was tattooed No. 43037.

The Block 9 prisoners, aware of his experience, knowledge of German and other languages (but not Yiddish), recommended him as a kapo, (prisoner assigned by SS guards to supervise forced labor), deputy to the well-known murderer Block Chief Konczal. In August 1942, he was sent to Block Officers School and appointed a clerk in Block 4. After he recuperated from typhus he returned to Block 9 as Konczal’s deputy. Later, in Blocks 39 and 20, he was removed from his position as a block chief and placed as a laborer. From March 1944 until January 1945 he toiled in Buna-Monowitz and in Jawischowitz mines, and was evacuated to Buchenwald. Eventually, he returned to Paris after liberation.

While in camps Eliezer had to clear his name as a kapo in order to be able to join the underground. Two prisoners’ “honour courts” concluded that there was nothing exceptional about his kapo activities and this allowed him to join the underground.

However, upon his release from Buchenwald, on May 25, 1945, the Polish Communist Party started to conduct an extensive inquiry in Warsaw, Buchenwald and Paris and found him guilty of maltreating prisoners, stealing their rations. It denied that he had ever fought in Spain, questioned his Communist record and subsequently he was barred from return to Poland. This was a bitter joke, because in refugees’ camps he encouraged other Jews to return to Poland and begin a good life.

In September 1945, Eliezer was beaten on a Paris street by a number of Jewish survivors, denounced as a “war criminal” and arrested by police. The new inquiry ran along four different perspectives: There was the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) version that accused him of hating religious Jews, murdering, beating and humiliating them, sometimes out of spite. There was the Communist Party verdict that accused him of spreading fear that the Soviet Union would lose the war and blindly serving Nazi masters.

But there were also witnesses who claimed that he saved lives, and that if he beat someone, it was necessary for the common good, for the block’s discipline and cleanliness had to be kept for the sake of the prisoners themselves.

And there was a family narrative: good Zionist Eliezer existed in 1933 and who defended him vigorously. They said he was being blamed by those who hated his father, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, who came to Paris and spent a fortune defending his son. He firmly believed that his son was being blamed by those who hated his Polish activities.

During the 1920s, Yitzhak Gruenbaum had formed a “Block of the Minorities,” in the Polish parliament, uniting Jews, Ukrainians, Belorussians and Germans – 40 percent of the population. This angered the Poles suspicious of a planned Jewish domination and also the Aguda, which believed that he was stirring anti-Semitism, and that the Jews should look after their own interests only. Finally, in 1926 Josef Pilсудski became a dictator, but the Aguda struggle against Gruenbaum and Zionism continued unabated. The haredim at Block 9 claimed that Eliezer inherited the hatred of religious Jews in the house of his father.

It was a fact that Eliezer, as a good Communist, had little respect for those Yiddish-speaking Jews who reminded him of the ghetto he sought to escape, and may have treated them more harshly. But many such prisoners were prejudiced to him since they were taught to despise his father. They also found him arrogant, blindly serving Konczal. No other kapo was judged by such prejudices, and the animosity was mutual. The task of a kapo was a demanding one; it was difficult to keep order under terrifying camp conditions and violent means were frequently needed to keep order. Haredi Jews would not forgive Eliezer for beatings that they would suffer silently under other kapo.

After prolonged and costly proceedings, the French court had decided in 1946 that it could not judge a foreigner whose alleged crimes were committed in a foreign country. Eliezer was freed, but he had nowhere to go. He could not remain in France, Poland refused to take him in. Here again, his father secured from Hillel Seidman an Agudat Israel certificate (!) for Palestine. Thus Eliezer arrived in Jerusalem on May 1, 1946, where he lived quietly and fell in defense of Ramat Rahel on May 22, 1948. The haredi version was that someone shot him dead. His friend, Stefa Rosenzweig, committed suicide.

The Israeli Defense Ministry’s official memorial, agreed upon in close cooperation with the survivors and the families of the prisoners, confirmed his convictions and his activism against the regime. He was placed in a separate墓地, with a plaque stating that he was killed in a war of Independence, he reported for service with the People’s Guard, and when the fighting intensified, for regular service. His military experience, sound judgment as an older man among younger ones, his friendliness, self-discipline and the good humor with which he made his comments all did much to raise his company’s morale. On May 22, 1948, a concerted attack was made on Ramat Rahel. Eliezer volunteered to set out with the reinforcements and took his machine gun with him. During the battle he was hit, but continued to shoot, covering his comrades, until he was hit again.

The strife about Eliezer’s conduct continued for the next 50 years, during which books, films, newspaper articles, even a TV show in 2002, continued to elaborate on this tragedy. Haredi journalists continued to blame him and his father as a part of a larger process of grappling with two severe blows to their society: the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. They argued that Zionism generated Nazism. They asked whether Jews should have accepted positions of responsibility that served the Nazi regime. The fact was that kapos had to be brutal, but they frequently helped prisoners survive. Many witnesses who met Eliezer in the camps and in the underground found him helpful.

Tuvia Friling writes well and with deep feeling. The book offers a substantial background historical information. We watch with understanding the tragedy of a young man who started his intellectual progress at Hashomer Hatzair, but fell victim to Communism and betrayal. A strange quirk fateed this misguided Jew to make the supreme sacrifice at Ramat Rahel, and thus he became a defender of Israel, and this should not be forgotten.