

The Shot Heard All Over the Country

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August 6, 2016

ON JUNE 28, 1914, the Austrian heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, visited Sarajevo, the main town of Bosnia, then an Austrian province.

Three young Serbian inhabitants of Bosnia had decided to assassinate him, in order to achieve the attachment of Bosnia to Serbia. They threw bombs at the car of the archduke. All three failed to harm him.

Later on, one of the assailants, Gavrilo Princip, chanced upon his intended victim again. The archduke's car had made a wrong turn, the driver tried to reverse, the car stalled, and Princip shot the duke dead.

That was “the shot heard around the world”. This small incident led to World War I, which led to World War II, with altogether some 100 million dead, to Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism and the Holocaust. Yet, while the names of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler will be remembered for centuries, the name of Gavrilo Princip, the most important person of the 20th century, is already forgotten.¹

For some reason, this insignificant person who made history reminds me of an insignificant young Israeli named Elor Azaria, whose act may well change the history of the State of Israel.

THE FACTS of the case are quite clear.

Two young Palestinians attacked an Israeli soldier with a knife in Tel Rumaida, a settlement of extremist Jews in the center of Hebron. The soldier was slightly wounded. The attackers were shot, one died on the spot, the other was severely wounded and lay bleeding on the ground.

What happened next was photographed by a local Palestinian with one of the many cameras distributed by the Israeli human rights association “B'Tselem” to the local population.

The crew of an Israeli ambulance was treating the wounded soldier, ignoring the seriously wounded Arab who was lying on the ground. Several Israeli soldiers were standing around, also ignoring the Palestinian. About 10 minutes later Sergeant Elor Azaria, a medic, appeared on the scene, approached the wounded Palestinian and shot him point-blank in the head, killing him.

According to eye-witnesses, Azaria declared that “the

¹Because he was only 19 years old, Austrian law did not allow him to be sentenced to death. He was sent to prison, where his death from tuberculosis went unnoticed in the middle of World War I.

terrorist must die”. Later, on the advice of his phalanx of lawyers, Azaria claimed that he was afraid that the wounded Palestinian had an explosive charge on his body and was about to kill the soldiers around him—an assertion clearly disproved by the pictures which showed the soldiers standing nearby obviously unconcerned. Then there was a mysterious knife which was not there at the beginning of the clip and could be seen lying near the body at the end.

The film was widely distributed on social media and could not be ignored. Azaria was brought before a military court and became the center of a political storm that has been going on for weeks. It is splitting the army, the public, the political scene and the entire state.

LET ME interject a personal note. I am not naive. In the 1948 war I was a combat soldier for ten consecutive months, before being severely wounded. I saw all kinds of atrocities. When the war was over, I wrote a book about these atrocities, called “The Other Side of the Coin” (in Hebrew). It was widely condemned.

War brings out the best and the worst in human nature. I have seen war crimes committed by people who, after the war, became nice, normal, law-abiding citizens.

So what is so special about Elor Azaria, apart from the fact that he was photographed during the act?

We all saw him on TV, sitting in the military courtroom during his trial, which is still going on. A childish-looking soldier, seeming quite lost. His mother sits directly behind him, cradling his head in her arms and stroking him all the time. His father sits nearby and in the intermissions shouts abuse at the military prosecutor.

So what is so special about this case? Similar acts happen all the time, though not on camera. It's routine. Especially in Hebron, where a few hundred fanatical settlers live among 160,000 Palestinians. Hebron is one of the oldest cities in the world. It existed long before Biblical times.

In the center of Hebron there is a building which, according to Jewish belief, houses the graves of the Israelite patriarchs. Archaeologists dispute this claim. Arabs believe that the tombs belong to venerable Muslim sheiks.

For them, the building is a mosque.

Since the beginning of the occupation, this has been a place of continued violent strife. The main street is reserved for Jews and closed to Arab traffic. For soldiers sent there to guard the settlers, it is hell.

In the clip, Azaria is seen shaking hands with somebody immediately after the killing. This person is no other than Baruch Marzel, the king of the Tel Rumaida settlers. Marzel is the successor of “Rabbi” Meir Kahane, who was branded as a fascist by the Supreme Court of Israel.²

During the trial it was revealed that Marzel plays host every Saturday to the entire company of Israeli soldiers guarding the settlement, including the officers. This means that Azaria was exposed to his fascist ideas before the shooting event.

WHAT MAKES the case of the “shooting soldier” (as he is called in the Hebrew press) a turning point in the history of the Zionist enterprise?

As I mentioned in a recent piece, Israel is now rent into diverse “sectors”, with the rifts between them growing ever wider. Jews and Arabs; Orientals (Mizrahim) and Europeans (Ashkenazim); secular and religious; exclusive orthodox and inclusive “national religious”; male and female; heterosexual and homosexual; old-timers and new immigrants, especially from Russia; rich and poor; Tel Aviv and the “periphery”; Left and Right; inhabitants of Israel proper and the settlers in the occupied territories.

The one institution which unites almost all these diverse—and mutually antagonistic—elements is the army. It is far more than a mere fighting force. It is where all Israeli youngsters (except the orthodox and the Arabs) meet on equal terms. It is the ‘melting pot’. It is the holiest of the holy.

Not any more.

This is where Sergeant Azaria comes in. He did not just kill a wounded Palestinian—named, by the way, Abd al-Fatah al-Sharif. He mortally wounded the army.

FOR SOME years now, a secret endeavor of the “national-religious” has been going on to conquer the army from below.

This sector was once a small and disdained group, since religious Jews by and large rejected Zionism altogether. According to their belief, God exiled the Jews because of their sins, and only God has the right to allow them back. By appropriating God's task for themselves, Zionists were committing a grievous sin.

The mass of religious Jews lived in Eastern Europe and were destroyed in the Holocaust. A number of them came to Palestine and are now a secluded, self-sufficient community in Israel, taking huge sums of money from the Zionist state and not saluting the Zionist flag.

The “national-religious”, on the other hand, grew in Israel from a small, timid community into a large and powerful force. Their tremendous birthrate—7 to 8 children is the norm—gives them a large advantage. When the Israeli army conquered East Jerusalem and the West Bank, studded with holy places, they also became assertive and self-assured.

Their present leader, Naftali Bennett, a successful high-tech entrepreneur, is now a dominant member of the government, in constant competition and conflict with Binyamin Netanyahu. The party has its own education system.

For decades now this party has been engaged in a determined effort to conquer the army from below. It has pre-army preparatory schools which produce highly-motivated future officers, and is slowly infiltrating the lower officer corps. Kippah-wearing captains and majors, once a rarity, are now very common.

ALL THIS is exploding now. The Azaria affair is blowing the army apart. The high command, still mainly composed of old-timers, Ashkenazim and (comparative) moderates, put Azaria on trial. Killing a wounded enemy is against army orders. Soldiers are allowed to shoot and kill only if they are in immediately danger to their lives.

A large part of the population, especially the religious and rightist sectors, protested loudly against the trial. Since the Azaria family is oriental, the protesters include the bulk of the oriental sector.

Netanyahu's acute political nose immediately scented the trend. He decided to visit the Azaria family, and was only held back at the last moment by his advisors. Instead, he called Elor's father, and conveyed his personal sympathies on the phone. Avigdor Lieberman, before his appointment as Minister of Defense, personally visited the courtroom in order to demonstrate his support for the soldier.

It was an open slap in the face of the army command.

Now the army, the last bulwark of national unity, is being torn apart. The high command is openly attacked as leftist, a term not far removed from traitorous in current Israeli discourse. The myth of military infallibility lies shattered, the authority of the high command profoundly damaged, criticism of the Chief of Staff is rampant.

In the contest between Sergeant Elor Azaria and the Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Gadi Eizenkot, the sergeant may well win. If convicted at all for blatantly disobeying orders, he will get off with a light sentence.

Killing a defenseless human being has turned him into a national hero. His was the shot that was heard all over the country. Perhaps all over the world.

²Marzel once openly called for my assassination.