



Uri Oren

A TOWN
CALLED
MONASTIR

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Prologue

One day in the summer of 1970 the telephone at my home rang and on picking up the receiver I heard an unknown voice. It was David Abikzer, who introduced himself as a former resident of Haifa and more recently Hazzan at the Sephardic Temple of Cedarhurst, New York. He sought an appointment and we arranged to meet at my home on the following afternoon.

My guest turned out to be a youngish man, of middling height and a firm visage. He spoke a somewhat throaty Hebrew, replete with literary turns of phrases, and speedily got to the point of his call.

It turned out that he had been a week in Israel already on a mission for a Jewish philanthropist, Mr. Louis Rousso, a resident of New York. Mr. Rousso has been a munificent donor to all kinds of charitable institutions in Israel and of late contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars for the establishment of a University Preparatory School on Mount Scopus to serve students from the Sephardi communities. Mr. Abikzer had been asked to represent Mr. Rousso at the corner-stone laying ceremony of the project. That was his first mission, while his second one had brought him to me.

I pressed him for details.

My guest related how Mr. Rousso was born in a small town in southern Yugoslavia where he spent most of his

childhood. One of his closest friends of that formative period in his life had been a man named Leon Kamhi, and whom he had not met since he moved to New York at the age of 15.

Leon Kamhi was an unusual man for that environment. A devoted Zionist, he saved literally hundreds of his fellow Jews from the Holocaust by persuading them to settle in Eretz-Israel during the 1930s. He, himself, kept postponing his own immigration for he did not wish to abandon his community.

He suffered the fate of European Jewry, and in 1943 was deported to the Treblinka death camp together with the rest of his community. Louis Rousso wished to establish a living memorial in the form of a book that would tell his life-story and the annals of his birthplace. He asked me to write the book.

"What is the name of the town? , I asked.

"Monastir", the Hazan explained.

I had never heard of that town before.

"The name written on the map is Bitol", Abikzer told me. It turned out that Monastir was the Turkish name of the place, and following the Balkan Wars and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire the name was changed to that of Bitol.

That name meant nothing to me either, after all geography had not been my speciality.

I picked up an old school atlas and together with the Hazan we picked our way through the map of southern Yugoslavia, until we found the place. A small town, registered in tiny letters at the junction of the borders of Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece.

In recalling my feelings at the time, I can only define them as a blend of hesitation and a sense of strangeness.

I wondered to myself: How could I possibly focus my magnifying glass on these forgotten letters, to such an ex-

tent as to be able to discern a living town? How could I possibly tell the story of a vanished community, most of whose members perished in the gas chambers and the remnants dispersed to the four corners of the earth? How could I possibly succeed in fashioning a person of flesh and blood and breathe a living spirit into the shadow of a person, of whom I had never heard before and who passed away when I was still a child?

Time passes and endures, and with it come the answers that seemed to unavailable to questions that have assumed a profounder meaning.

Today at the conclusion of long months of research, work and study, I find myself deeply grateful for the opportunity afforded me and for the very special experience I have undergone. I visited the town and persuaded its non-Jewish inhabitants to talk of their dead Jewish neighbours. I took photographs of the streets and places wherein occurred the events related in this book. I spoke to practically every person living in Israel who had known Leon Kamhi. Thereby I compiled and assembled the memories of his life's work.

Gradually but surely the image of this man began to emerge. I talked at length with many people, mostly the aged, whose retentive memory astonished me on the whole. One element added to another until the visage cleared through the mists of the past.

I think it only right and fit to register my personal tribute to Mr. Rouso for the project which he initiated and which has enriched my personal experience. I think it would be to the best if I utilise this space to quote from a letter he wrote me a few months ago when I began to work on this effort.

It was an illuminating letter:

"I arrived in the United States of America in 1913. I left behind me all my childhood friends in Monastir, and after a few years elapsed some of them began to reach the

American continent as well.

"Of all my friends who remained in Monastir, I remember best of all one boy named Louis Maurice Kamhi, a most promising and brilliant youngster. He was a year my senior and studied in a higher class.

As far as I can now recall he was the most brilliant boy in our school.

Fifty-five years after I left Monastir I came to Israel on a visit and took a room at the Dan Hotel in Tel Aviv for a few days. While there I got a call from my cousin, Nissim Rouusso who lives in Haifa. He told me that three men wish to see me on a most urgent matter and asked me to allow him to send them to see me. They were former residents of Monastir who had been living in Israel for the past 35 years. They begged of me to back an idea of theirs, which they had been considering for some time.

"It concerned Leon Kamhi who perished in the Treblinka death camp together with three thousand fellow Jews from Monastir in 1943. They felt that this man, who saved the lives of hundreds of his co-religionists during the 1930s, was not being suitably commemorated. They said he deserved a worthy memorial.

"I gave my agreement in principle.

"I do not doubt that Leon Kamhi was an exceptional individual in his concept of life and in his courageousness. He predicted the oncoming catastrophe and did all that he could to send members of his community to Eretz-Israel before it would be too late. His efforts reached their height during the late 1930s, and the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 found him still in Monastir. As a brave captain he refused to abandon the sinking ship. He struggled as long as he could until it was too late to rescue himself and the members of his own family. They all perished amid the smoking chimneys of Treblinka.

"No one envisaged the horrors of the Holocaust

beforehand and even Kamhi did not imagine such a dreadful end. However, he admonished and warned of the impending dangers. With that he dismissed the entreaties that he join the groups of people he was sending to Eretz-Israel. Instead he stayed at his post to the end. He would say that he could not leave his community as a flock without a shepherd.

"The three men who called on me at the Dan Hotel urged that I set up a monument memorial to Leon Kamhi. I devoted much thought to the idea and finally turned it down. I believe that a stone monument of that kind was not the most appropriate form to commemorate a man, because in the course of time it will have no meaning for the young who will only see a name inscribed on stone.

"Rabbi Marans, the Rabbi of the Sephardic Temple in Cedarhurst, New York, and the Hazzan Abikzer, were the ones who convinced me that the best memorial to Leon Kamhi would be a book that would relate the story of his life and deeds. I would like you to take on this mission. As for myself, I consider myself duty bound to facilitate the publication of this volume because I knew this man in my youth and I am fully cognizant that he deserved such a tribute.

"It is my hope that those people who knew Leon Kamhi during his life and the many more who will become acquainted with him through this book, will learn to appreciate the meaning of human devotion and self-sacrifice.

"The late Leon Kamhi gave us a lesson that must be remembered. Men do not come into this world only in order to live out their lives and enjoy their pleasures, without a thought for others. Whosoever considers that his life's meaning is in public service and indeed carries out this philosophy to its logical conclusion gives a new significance to the lives of us all.

"It is painfully sad to think that Leon Kamhi did not live long enough to witness the renaissance of Israel and the establishment of the Jewish State. For that was the purpose of his life since his early youth. The Almighty placed him where he did in order to give life to hundreds of others. Accordingly I do believe that Leon Kamhi was a martyr in the most noble meaning of the word."

I have reproduced Mr. Rouso's letter in full, because it contains one of the finest testimonials to the memory of Leon Kamhi. I also consider that due tribute should be paid to Mr. Rouso for his contribution to the publication of this work with all the efforts and endeavours involved thereby.

I was given the opportunity of meeting Mr. Rouso in person when he visited Israel for a second time in 1970. I found a man of dignified mien. We discussed the content of the memorial project, after I began to assemble the material. I told Mr. Rouso that history had hardly left any testimonies to Leon Kamhi's life's work, while the town of Monastir had hardly earned any mention in the history books besides a few lines.

Most of the material I gathered from the recollections of men who were born and raised in Monastir – Bitol. Likewise I assembled my raw material from the General Archives in Belgrade, from the newspapers of the periods, from the memories of the men who worked side by side with Kamhi in his Zionist efforts, and from the slim volume brought out by the township of Bitol in memory of the destroyed Jewish community.

On March 11, 1943, the Germans and the Bulgarians deported three thousand Jews from Bitol and despatched them to their deaths. Only six persons managed to survive. All the others perished in the gas chambers.

I wish, therefore, to tell of the life and work of Leon Kamhi against the backdrop of the Jewish community of

Bitol. Not only because thereby I sought to establish a living memorial to an entire community that was erased from the face of the earth, but because Leon Kamhi's life was lived out amid a profound identity of fate with that of his community. The fact of the matter is that Leon Kamhi hardly had any private life of his own. He did not find time to setup his own family until the age of 40, some five years before he met his death under such cruel circumstances. Literally no one could speak at length of his personal life, but only of his public work and Zionist activity.



Mr. Louis E. Rousso