

Trinity College Cambridge
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Some Modern Saints?
Anton Schmid (1900–42)

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“I have only acted as a human being.”

One September evening in 1941, Luisa Emaitisaite, a young Lithuanian woman found herself outside the Jewish Ghetto of Vilnius. Trying to avoid the on-going anti-Jewish raids that day, she had failed to return to the ghetto before the curfew and now did not know what to do on this side of the locked up ghetto door. Her situation appeared to be hopeless. If discovered by any member of the occupying German Wehrmacht, she risked being shot on the spot. She was hiding in the entrance of a house when she noticed a uniformed German walking through the street in the dark, cigarette in hand. She mustered all her courage, approached him directly, and out of desperation asked him for help.

The German Wehrmacht-soldier was Anton Schmid who was on his way home from work. In occupied Vilnius he was in charge of the office responsible for gathering scattered soldiers who had lost their units in the war and for re-integrating them into the army. Although wearing a German uniform, he did in fact come from Vienna where he had left his wife and daughter upon being drafted into Hitler's war. Anton was posted in Vilnius which was often referred to as the Jerusalem of the East since a large population of Jewish men, women and children (60 000 of a total population of 215 000) had been living there for generations. Since the arrival of the Germans, however, their lives were threatened. Outside of Vilnius in a forest near a village called Ponary (or Paneriai) thousands of Jews had already been murdered by the Nazis, including all of Luisa's relatives. Undoubtedly Anton Schmid knew of the horrific and carefully orchestrated mass murder of Jews. But he must also have been aware that anybody, and in particular any soldier, who ignored the order to treat Jews as enemies and hid them from the Nazi murder-machine risked his own life.

Luisa Emaitisaite risked everything by asking a German soldier for help, and Anton Schmid risked everything by deciding to help her. Luisa asked Anton if he would be so kind as to rent her a room in a cheap hotel so that she could feel secure for the night. However, Anton answered that such a move would be too dangerous for her given the constant controls by the German authorities, and instead he suggested that he could hide her in his own army flat. When Luisa and Anton realised the next day that the raids were continuing, and that therefore Luisa's life would be in danger the moment she left his flat, he decided to keep her there for the whole week. Then he suggested to Luisa that he would save her life by arranging a new 'arian' identity for her. That required a somewhat complex strategy:

First, Anton took Luisa to see a Polish Carmelite monk in the nearby church of Ostra Brama. There he explained the situation to Fr Andreas Gdowski and asked him to issue a document identifying Luisa as a Catholic, well known to the monastery. Moreover, Fr Gdowski was to confirm that Luisa's parents had been deported by the Soviets and that at that point all her papers had been lost. The monk commented: "An old man like me has no need to be afraid of people, and in front of God I can well justify this fraud." He gave Luisa a typewriter so that she herself could type the desired document on the Monastery's official paper. Fr Andreas signed and sealed the document which made Luisa now a Polish Catholic. Thereafter, Anton accompanied his protégé to five different offices of the occupying German bureaucracy in order to be able to employ Luisa in his own army office. She needed first a work permit, then a permit to rent a room, then an identity card, and finally a certificate from the residents' registration office. Once Luisa was in possession of all these documents, she no longer needed to live in fear of the continuing political and antisemitic raids. She could move freely, and she could start to work in Anton Schmid's office. Her new identity protected her. She did survive the war and the holocaust.

Why did Anton Schmid act in this way? Why did he risk his life by saving this young Jewish woman whom he had never met before? He never demanded or received any financial reward. He did not ask any questions. Rather he was confronted with a concrete human need and he responded to it. As far as we know, Schmid never composed any protest letter against the on-going persecution and murder of Jewish women, men and children. He did not write to any German authority to demand a stop to the holocaust. He was not known as a member of any official resistance group against Hitler and his followers. However, we do know that Luisa was not the only person he saved in Vilnius.

The first Jew he had saved from the Nazi death squads in Vilnius was Max Salinger, a young Polish man. We do not know any details of how the two had met. After the war Max Salinger visited Anton Schmid's wife Stefanie and told her how Anton had saved his life. Anton had given Max a fallen soldier's registration book and identity; put him into a Wehrmacht uniform, and drafted him into his own army office to work.

Anton Schmid then continued to save many more Jews in Vilnius, among them the writer Hermann Adler and the opera singer Anita Distler who had met and married in Vilnius. Again, Hermann Adler had approached Anton in the street and asked him for help. He later admitted that he knew from the church of Ostra Brama that Schmid had helped a Jewish girl, namely Luisa. Later on the Adlers suggested to Schmid that he organise some form of secret transport of Jews from the ghetto in Vilnius to the city of Bialystok. Schmid recalled that a friend of his from Vienna was stationed in Bialystok. He offered the couple something to eat and asked them to come back in a few days. When they returned he gave them a room in his office where they lived for the next three months and functioned as the connecting link between the emerging Jewish resistance movement in the ghetto and Schmid. A number of convoys between Vilnius and Bialystok were organised by Schmid, Salinger and the Adlers to bring around 300-350 Jews into the relative security of that particular city.

In Vilnius itself Schmid was also in charge of a number of workshops. Here he employed displaced German soldiers, Russian prisoners of war and Jews from the ghetto. He issued documents to the prisoners and Jews which confirmed that they worked for the Wehrmacht in an essential capacity in the respective workshop. Thus, these workers were somewhat protected against arbitrary controls, raids, arrests and executions by the German SS troops and their Lithuanian auxiliary police in the streets of Vilnius. It is reckoned that Schmid managed to employ and thus to protect around 150 Jewish craftsmen in his workshops where there was work for no more than 50 people. In this way he probably saved many Jews from certain death.

As we have seen, Schmid also made his army flat available for secret gatherings of the Jewish resistance parties from the Vilnius ghetto. Some of those present at these meetings could at first not believe their eyes that their conspirational meetings were in fact taking place in a flat belonging to the German army.

Needless to say, Anton Schmid ran a major risk by helping individual Jews and Jewish organisations as well as the emerging Jewish resistance groups in Vilnius. At the end of January 1942 he was arrested by the German secret field police outside of Vilnius. We do not know exactly why or whether or not he had been denounced. But we do know that his arrest happened in connection with one of the clandestine transportation of Jews out of Vilnius. Schmid was put into prison and then tried. On 25 February 1942 he was condemned to death. The papers of the trial are lost, so we do not know with which criminal offence he actually was charged. Saving Jews was not a crime listed in German military law. Some historians assume therefore that he was charged with treason and support of the enemy – Jews were considered enemies in Nazi thinking; both offences were deemed to deserve capital punishment. Anton Schmid was executed on 13 April 1942 by a firing squad in a Vilnius prison.

When it became known in Vienna that sergeant Schmid had been executed because he had attempted to save Jews, his wife and daughter were made to suffer being harassed and defamed. Their windows were smashed. During the subsequent fifteen years they received no support from the Austrian state until eventually in the late nineteen fifties Anton Schmid was declared to have been a victim of the NS state. Although the Jews whom he had saved and who were lucky enough to survive the Holocaust honoured Schmid and his family, the wider public first learned about his attempts to help and save Jews in 1961 during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In her book about *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Hannah Arendt reports how witnesses referred to the saving action of Feldwebel Anton Schmid and that a complete silence of two minutes was observed in the court when Schmid's deeds were recounted. She adds: 'And in those two minutes which appeared to be like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question – how utterly different everything would be today in this court room, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told.' In 1964 Anton Schmid was one of the first Germans and Austrians to be honoured by the State of Israel at Yad Vashem as 'Righteous among the Nations'.

In today's gospel reading we heard of the Samaritan, who when he saw the beaten man on the road took pity on him and helped him. And we heard a reading from the first of two letters which Schmid wrote to his wife and daughter before his execution. Here he explained: 'I have only acted as a human being'. In his last letter, written on the day of his execution, he refers again to the fact that he merely saved the lives of other human beings, albeit Jews, and lost his life as a result of his deeds. 'As I have always done everything for others in my life, so have I sacrificed my everything for others.' He then committed himself into the hand of God. The Roman Catholic padre Fritz Kropp offered Schmid pastoral support during his last hours. Later he wrote to Schmid's widow Steffi that Anton had remained strong until his death, received the sacraments of the church and prayed the Lord's Prayer before being shot.

Many Jews have said that, for them, Anton Schmid was something like a saint. For example, in a letter to the German government in the year 2000 Simon Wiesenthal wrote: 'For decades the name Feldwebel Anton Schmid has been like a saint for me.' It is remarkable that Anton Schmid counts as a saint for Jews, though not, or not yet, for Christians. When again in the year 2000 the German government decided to name a military barracks in his honour, many people raised protests. I have not come across any Roman Catholic acknowledgement of the saintly self-sacrifice of this ordinary Catholic conscript from Vienna. 'I have only acted as a human being.' As a member of the German Wehrmacht he defended human and Christian values by seeing the other human being as human. He did not obey his orders to consider Jews as *Untermenschen*, but resisted such orders and defended every instance of humanity through his spontaneous and courageous actions.

Was Anton Schmid a saint? Officially speaking he has not been recognised as one by his own church, which is otherwise often quick to create saints. For our Jewish brothers and sisters he proved to be a saint. And with the historian Wolfram Wette, who devoted his most recent study to Anton Schmid, I hope that this Feldwebel will be widely recognised as a shining example of a human being who heard and answered the higher call of a greater obligation than military orders.

Further Reading

- ◆ Wolfram Wette, *Feldwebel Anton Schmid: Ein Held der Humanität*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2013.
- ◆ Wolfram Wette, *Karl Jäger: Mörder der litauischen Juden*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2011.
- ◆ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin, [1963] 2006.