

# Isaac Feinstein – a martyr for Christ in Romania

Kai Kjær-Hansen, International Coordinator of LCJE

## Jewish believers from the past

Tonight it is going to be about Isaac.

The first Isaac, the Isaac in the biblical story, was spared by God. In Isaac's stead was sacrificed a ram. When it comes to this evening's Isaac – Isaac Feinstein – God did not spare him.

Isaac Feinstein, a Romanian Jesus-believing Jew, breathed his last in the summer of 1941 in a cattle car outside the town of Jassy in north-eastern Romania, together with about 140 other Jews. He literally expired, the cause of death being suffocation due to lack of oxygen in the overfull cattle car. He had not yet turned 40 and he was the father of six children with his Lydia, whom he had married in 1928. She was Swiss and had worked as a teacher in one of the English mission schools in Bucharest.

### Declared dead by his father

Born to Jewish parents, Isaac Feinstein had seen the light of day in 1904. Later he saw the light, Jesus, and was declared dead by his father. Richard Wurmbrand, who had been baptized by Isaac Feinstein on 25 March, 1938, on a later occasion referred to him as a "martyr for Christ among the Jewish people". Wurmbrand describes how, when Isaac had received the holy baptism, his father regards him as dead, "says the kaddish over him and sits on the ground for seven days as a sign of grief and sings songs of mourning for the dead."

In his father's consciousness Isaac is dead, and yet, Wurmbrand continues, Feinstein was "more alive than ever". He had met the gospel through the Plymouth Brethren. In 1928 he comes in contact with the Norwegian Israel Mission and is employed as a missionary assistant and evangelist. But first he receives a year's education in Warsaw with Joseph Immanuel Landsmann, and afterwards he also studies in Leipzig at the Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum.

During his stay in Warsaw he goes on a missionary journey to Poland in the summer of 1929 together with other students. He begins his description of this tour by quoting some words said by a teacher at a Hebrew high school in one of the towns they visit: "We can tolerate the biggest criminals, we can tolerate the most horrifying murderers, we can tolerate the lowest prostitutes, we can tolerate pimps, but you, you Jewish Christians, you missionaries, we will never be able to tolerate you."

In another town they are met with a shout from one in the audience who insists that all Jewish Christians have a cross tattooed on their left arm, the arm where Jews usually put on their phylacteries. The argument was that Christians in this way would make sure that Jewish Christians would not be able to return to Judaism. Feinstein disproves it by showing his arm. But then someone in the crowd shouts, "He has the cross on his heart." Feinstein is ready to unbutton his shirt but before that happens, someone else shouts, "No, he has not got in *on* his heart but *in* his heart." This gave Feinstein an opportunity to testify that real faith has to do with the heart.

And Feinstein's heart was beating for Jews to hear the gospel about Jesus. He was the evangelist who from 1932 worked in the town of Galatz, but also made journeys elsewhere, preaching and giving lectures with slides. He was a talented singer. He published two magazines *Prietenul* (The Friend) and *Prietenul Copiilor* (The Children's Friend). He distributed Bibles, etc.

When the Norwegian Magne Solheim arrives in Romania in 1938, Feinstein is asked to take up work in Jassy, something we cannot go into here. In the summer of 1938 Joseph Hoffman Cohn, leader of the American Board of Missions to the Jews (ABMJ -now Chosen People Ministries), meets Feinstein in Budapest and tries to persuade him to leave Europe because of

threat from Nazism. Cohn offers Feinstein a position in New York City as a missionary to the Jews. But Feinstein thought it would be an act of cowardice to leave his post. When the war between Romania and the Soviet Union breaks out in June 1941, Wurmbrand and others try to get him to move to Bucharest, where he would be safer than in Jassy. Also that is turned down by Feinstein. He wants to be where his little flock is.

On June 22, 1941 he holds a service in Jassy. This service was to be his last.

### **The disaster on June 29 1941**

In the end of June 1941 the town of Jassy is under heavy fire from Russian artillery. On June 28 a pogrom breaks out, in which Germans and Romanians attack the Jews of Jassy. In a few days 11,000-12,000 Jews were killed. Feinstein was seized in the morning of June 29. At a search of his house a small Norwegian flag was found; this flag with a cross on a red cloth, was wrongly supposed to be a Bolshevik symbol. They also found the flag of Zionism. Feinstein is taken away – by all accounts with the Norwegian flag in one hand and the Zionist star flag in the other.

Not until some months later is Lydia, Isaac Feinstein's wife, told what has happened to her husband. Some years later she tells her children so they can know what happened "and how suddenly one day our family happiness was smashed".

Lydia Feinstein's account is moving. Let us listen to her.

### **Lydia Feinstein's account**

"Towards the end of September 1941, hence three months after the abduction of our father, it was reported in the city that a number of Jews had been freed from concentration camps to be used here in town for cleaning away rubble of the bombs. The same evening two men reported to me. They had much to tell me. I recognized them as former attendants of our meetings and knew that I could believe their words. What they told me left me nearly benumbed with shock.

They related the following: 'We were with your husband that very Sunday. In the cellar already he was a help to all. In the evening they led us into the yards of the police station. There were so many of us that we lay on top of each other like sardines. Our tormentors were doubtless hoping we would be hit by bombs. Regardless of the blasting around us we were spared. Alas! During the early morning we were led in long lines to the railway station. It was said that we were to be brought to concentration camps. Feinstein was in the same car as us. We were penned in until we could not catch a breath and no one could move, about 140 men in one cattle car in which there would have normally been room for only forty men. The doors, windows, all holes and cracks were sealed tightly and steam was introduced from below. It was a horrible holocaust; many were insane in the screaming of the torture. It was harrowing and heartbreaking. From time to time the freight car was left standing for hours in the boiling heat of the sun. Terrifying scenes occurred and those of us who got away from it are haunted daily with the memory.

Perhaps your husband did not have to suffer long. He soon started to recite Psalms with a loud voice and his face was like that of an angel. He begged the other victims to make their peace with God and to seek salvation through the blood of Christ before it was too late. And some did before it was too late. Then he dropped to the floor and fell asleep never to wake up again. During the night, at a small station in Moldavia, the cars were opened and the bodies fell out. It was supposed that all had been suffocated on this mortal journey. But six of us men who had only been unconscious were injured when our bodies fell out, and recovered consciousness. We were revived with hypodermics and then some nourishment was given us. Then we were forced to bury our dead comrades in a mass grave. On that occasion, we found our beloved Feinstein. We dug a special grave for him. Previously to that we searched his pocket to send you if possible, his papers or anything else; but he had nothing left, not even his watch. Everything had been taken from him before. After that we had to do hard labor in a camp with many others and endured a pitiful existence. Many times we regretted that life had been restored back to us. Now we have been brought back into the city. But no good is awaiting us."

The two men testify a few days later in a court that Isaac Feinstein is dead. Mrs Feinstein gets a death certificate for her husband, and in October 1942 she can bring herself and her six children to safety in Switzerland. She writes in that connection:

"Without that paper [the death certificate] we would have never been granted a passport and

would not have been able to leave the country. In that way the death of your beloved father made possible your salvation, my dear children. It had always been his wish to bring you to Switzerland, to safety; only from that expensive price it was made possible. Oh that you might never forget that precious life and sacrifice." In conclusion she writes:

"After all, we must understand that God's ways, which seem so inconceivable and cruel, mean love and mercy in the end. Only eternity will tell how much fruit and blessing have resulted from that tearful sowing."

Moving words said by the mother of six fatherless children. In passing it may be mentioned that the youngest son, Daniel Spoerri (Spoerri after his mother's maiden name), was to be a famous multi-artist (see the internet).

In the book *Christ on the Jewish Road* (1970) Wurmbrand says the following about Feinstein's death: "He died while the rabbi was reciting the Psalms aloud, and Feinstein was explaining what they foretold about Jesus. When death came by suffocation, his head was resting on the rabbi's shoulder. The rabbi himself died a few moments later – a Mosaic Jew and a Christian Jew were the victims of the same hatred .."

So God did not spare Feinstein – this Isaac. Just as he did not spare his own son. In the apostle Paul's words: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8,31-32).

*Kai Kjær-Hansen lcje-int@skjern.net.dk*

### **Selected bibliography**

Isaac Feinstein, "Beretning om missionsreisen gjennom Polen 11te til 20de juli 1929", *Missions-Blad for Israel*, 1929, 208-215. Lydia Sporri Feinstein, *Jødebarns Minne, Beretning fra redselsdagene og hjelpearbeidet* (Oslo, Den Norske Israelsmisjon, 1949. = *Misjonsblad for Israel*, 1947, 162-164; 1948, 2-4; 11-12; 21-22. – English translation of Lydia Feinstein's account in *The Chosen People*, 1947, no. 53, 14-16. Magne Solheim, *I skuggen av hagekors, hammar og sigd* (Oslo, Luther Forlag), 1981. Richard Wurmbrand, "Jødekristne i Romania", *Misjonsblad for Israel*, 1946, 163-164. Mitchell Leslie Glaser, *A Survey of Missions to the Jews in Continental Europe 1900-1950* (Ann Arbor, UMI, 1999), 188  
194.