

# Forgotten Heroines of Jerusalem and Munich

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## Introduction

Roi: Who is a hero? Who is a heroine? Answering such a question is not an easy feat.

Aviad: No, it is really not. And then there is the question of the definition. What does someone have to do to become a hero?

Jaya: And who even decides that?

Roi: I'm Roi from Jerusalem.

Jaya: I'm Jaya from Munich.

Aviad: And I am Aviad from Jerusalem as well.

Roi: And we will take you on a journey through our cities to uncover a bit of the hidden history of local heroines.

Aviad: I think a hero or heroine is someone who acts with courage, someone who is willing to risk himself or herself while saving others, even someone who uses her or his abilities to do something positive.

Jaya: That is quite a broad description. The word hero always makes me think of comic books or action movies. But we are doing a history podcast, so I think we should take a look at the historical perspective.

Roi: Well, many of those comic and movie heroes are inspired by real people. I think that from an historical point of view, a hero could be a person who acted bravely vis-à-vis someone else.

Jaya: Yes, I think that sounds fitting. The characteristics of historical memory are somewhat bizarre though. Sometimes a society chooses to overlook a potential hero or heroine only because he or she was not considered to belong to a group which then produces forms of collective memories or because they acted against those collective memories. Thus, a potential hero, and especially a heroine, might be forgotten.

Aviad: Well, the word collective seems to be key here. One prominent Holocaust scholar, Prof. Dan Diner, claims that it is necessary to be part of a collective in order to enter the collective memory. He researched the memory of genocides in the twentieth century. Diner questions why the Jewish Holocaust was so eminent compared to other genocides such as the Romani people's Holocaust or even Stalin's great purge.

Roi: I read about Diner as well. I think he suggests that the answer might lie in the form of relationships that were there, before the events between the victims and the aggressors. He claims that because the Jewish-Christian, and more specifically, a German-Jewish relationship was so prominent in the societies' consciousness even before the Holocaust, it was so prominent in the collective memory afterwards.

Aviad: Another reason why some events are remembered lies in the structure of collective memory. Ethnic minorities, for example, that had a structured collective consciousness, like the Ukrainians or the Poles still remember Stalin's purge, while other minorities with less pronounced collective identities tend to forget his violations.

Jaya: So, in other words what he is saying is that a historical hero or heroine is someone who was in the right place at the right time and their acts aligned with the collective norms of the society they belong to. That also means: If one doesn't act within (or against) a collective frame of reference it is likely that their acts will be forgotten.

Roi: Exactly. And this is the reason why, in this podcast, we will shine a light to three distinctive stories of heroines which were forgotten; one Münchnerin and two Jerusalemite heroines.

Aviad: While telling their stories we will also raise questions concerning collective memory and collective omission of memories.

Jaya: Simply put: Why are some people not considered heroines or heroes within their societies?

### **Bella Freund**

Roi: On many occasions, a hero or a heroine is someone who resists a strong but unlawful power. In the story of the Haredic (Ultra-orthodox) Jerusalemite Bella Freund, which we are just about to uncover, these features are present. The context of her act might hint at some reasons why she is absent from the collective memory. Why does hardly anybody in Israel nor in Palestine know her name, let alone erected a memorial in her honor?

The only significant popular reference to her act is found in the song “Bella Bellissima”— “Bella the beautiful.” It was released in 2003, more than ten years after the event, by one of the most famous Hip-Hop bands in Israel, the Dag Nachash or the “snake fish”. The band was founded in Jerusalem in the 1990s, just a couple of year after her act. During an interview in 2009, Shaanan Street, the main singer, said that for years he remembered the incident and that during the second Intifada—which means literally “a tremor,” or “shaking off” in Arabic, but was the name of the Palestinian popular national resistance. He said that the violence of the second Intifada, which was characterized by even more violence than that of the time of her act, made him feel that he must write about her act.

The band begins their song with this description:

*[The song in its Hebrew original, and then the given translation]*

“Tuesday, 12 May 1992; A woman steps out of her house in Jerusalem; Normal standard day; Nothing special like any other day; A load of kids in the streets; There was a teachers’ strike; Same time exactly a revolting terrorist; Pulls out a kitchen knife; And with it stabs two innocent kids; Another mad cruel attack; Another nationalist attack.”

It is hard to imagine, especially without being Israeli or Palestinian, how intense the fear and the anger were during the last days of the first Intifada. The somewhat shiny, almost blinding light reflected from the white limestone of the building of Jerusalem is also misleading. A visitor who would go between the small and packed streets of the city center in Jerusalem in those days would probably be confused from the sense of collective horror. Everything seems so normal, but everyone always looks over their shoulder.

After the violent yet effective repression of the popular protests by the Israeli army and police, the resistance of the Palestinians took another turn. The acts of terror became more individualistic, unorganized but frequent and were directed more and more against civilians. The Palestinian Adnan al-Afandi (عدنان الافندي), back then a man of twenty-one from Dheisheh refugee-camp near Beit-Lahem (مخيم الدهيشه), was one of many young Palestinians who participated in what we call “stabbing attacks”. After stabbing and injuring two young Israeli teens in Mahane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem he began running away, passing by Bella Freund, and fled into an underground parking area of a nearby shopping mall. By the way, this shopping mall is called Klal Center and maybe you are familiar with it.

Hearing the voice of the crowd shouting “an Arab, an Arab” Freund understood the potential outcome of the event. She ran after him, lay down on him (to cover and protect his body from the assault), and for twenty-seven minutes suffered from the violence of the crowd

until the police came. While saving the terrorist's life the mob beat her, burned her with cigarettes, and even bullets were shot in the air.

*[Hearing the song in Hebrew and then the English translation]*

“20 minutes she took all those kicks; Her kids watched and didn't stop crying.”

Her act of resistance had the potential to become heroic. It is, as we have defined at the beginning of the podcast, a brave and risky act which she did in order to save a human life. But she never became a symbol nor a heroine. As Shaanan Street the singer states:

*[Hearing the song and the translation]*

“This lady did not turn into a symbol; And in fact, her name has been erased from consciousness; There is no mail-stamp with her face.”

Why is it that she did not become a heroine (even though she saved someone's life while risking her own life)? It is of course hard to be certain, but the song suggests some underlying reasons:

*[Hearing the song and the translation]*

“Perhaps because Israel is not yet ready; And is not willing; To bring to its heart a hero whose heroism is not war-like; A hero whose heroism is not military; A hero whose heroism is just moral; A hero who is a woman, and a Haredit at that.”

The song provides many reasons for her absence from history. But if we emphasize her religiosity and womanhood as key factors, it may lead us to our next story, the story of the Münchnerin Ellen Ammann.

Jaya: So, Roi, you talk a lot about what Bella did and why it might have been forgotten. But what I am still asking myself is: why? Why would she do that, what was her motivation for protecting someone who was seen as an enemy or an aggressor by many Israelis?

Roi: I think that it is a really good question, Jaya, since I think that her motivation is an important reason why her act was ignored. What I mean is that I think her religious stance was an important motivational factor, she actually said it later in every interview.

In Israel, now even more than back then, religion is somewhat connected to a more aggressive approach towards the Palestinians. Let's say it's a more national-religious approach to the conflict than just a national one. With her act she broke this distinction between religion and nationalism. Moreover, because of her being an ultra-religious woman her heroic act became even more controversial. Actually, in the Israeli society, and I think

even more extreme within the religious community it is supposed to be the men who save the women, not the other way around. If we combine everything I just said—Bella Freund was a woman who acted in unconformity with her gender roles and more importantly, she acted against the stereotype of national-religious people in Israel—acting from religious motivation in order to defend and not to arrest or kill an Arab and not let him be killed no matter what he did. This was and still is so incomprehensible for most of the “regular” Israelis and the media to make sense of, that most preferred to forget her act.

### **Ellen Ammann**

Jaya: I am going to tell you how Ellen Ammann played a big part in preventing the Hitler Putsch in 1923. Many of us know about the Putsch, but have you heard about Ammann’s role in that story yet? No? Then listen closely.

Only a stone’s throw away from the University, down the bustling Amalienstreet is the Theresienstreet 25. It is a nondescript rectangular building painted in a dirty yellow color. Do you see it? The angular windows are symmetrically placed on the facade in exact rows. There is nothing special or outstanding about Theresienstreet number 25. But what the history the yellow facade hides is anything but boring. This is the place where the house of women’s rights activist Ellen Ammann used to be. Yes, used to—it was destroyed in an air raid towards the end of the Second World War in 1945.

But let’s start at the beginning: Ellen Ammann was born in 1870 in Stockholm. In 1890 she married a German doctor and moved with him to Munich. Ellen Ammann was a devout Catholic, politician, and social worker. Her whole life, she supported and fought for women’s rights, especially the underprivileged. She founded the Bavarian Catholic Women’s Association, the first Christian (station) mission in Munich, and a school for women. In 1919, during the German Revolution, Ammann became one of the first women serving as a deputy in the Bavarian parliament. In the parliament, she observed with worry how the Nazis continued to gain strength and even once tried to initiate the forced eviction of Hitler from Germany. It was unsuccessful, but Ellen Ammann remained alert and started to suspect that something was about to happen. She proved to be right.

Now, I am taking you back 98 years, to the evening of the 8th of November 1923. What exactly happened on that evening is uncertain, but it might have gone something like this: Gustav Kahr, the Bavarian General State Commissioner, is just having an assembly at the Hofbräuhaus to announce his political goals. Ellen expressed her concerns about the assembly

in the afternoon, but no one listened. Now she is sitting at the dinner-table with her family when suddenly ....

[*Talking/Food Atmosphere*]

*\*the phone rings\**

Ottmar Ammann: "Ellen, it's for you!"

Ellen: "Who is it?"

Ottmar Ammann: "It is Meli von Godin, says she has some very urgent information to share."

Ellen: "Well, it better be urgent."

*walks... takes the phone*

Ellen: "Meli? Is everything alright?"

M.G: "...not really. *\*deep breath\** You know how you always say that we need to be careful of Hitler and the NSDAP..."

Ellen "Yes...What happened? Do you know something?"

M.G: "It might be nothing but, I was walking home across the Marienplatz when I noticed two of the NSDAP men, standing around and talking animatedly. I just casually stopped to admire the shop display, so I could hear what they were talking about. One of them was saying something about the Hofbräuhaus and how 'the government was just experiencing the surprise of their lives!' Ellen, I think there might be something going on!"

Ellen: *\*Sighs\** "I knew it! Kahr is having an assembly in the Hofbräuhaus just now. There are 3000 people and half of the government in there. I told them it was a bad idea...but who listens to a woman? I have to go, thank you for calling."

*Running back to the table.*

Ottmar Ammann: "Ellen.. are you alright? You look pale."

Ellen: "Get one of the paperboys from the street. He needs to go down to the Hofbräuhaus and see what's going on there. Tell him to be careful. Franz!"

Franz: "Yes, Mother?"

Ellen: "Get your bike and go down to the house of Franz Matt."

Franz: "The Vice Prime Minister??"

Ellen: “Yes! Tell him that the Nazis are planning something in the Hofbräuhaus and he needs to get here immediately. I am going to call the rest of the Ministers. We’re not going to let them take our city!”

That evening Ellen Ammann manages to assemble all the ministers not involved in the Putsch in the basement of her home. Together, they initiate the declaration condemning the Putsch as a crime against the state and inform the Reichswehr in Berlin about the events in Munich. The next morning, Ellen organizes a car to get the ministers out of Munich to safety in Regensburg. The Putsch ends a day later, unsuccessful.

The immediate reactions to her actions were admiration. The vice prime minister Franz Matt later said about her in parliament: “Our colleague Ellen Ammann showed more bravery than some of the Gentlemen here.”

Women’s rights activist Lida Gustava Heymann wrote about the Putsch in her memoir: “The reason, that this whole foolish undertaking did not end in a bloodbath, but instead fell apart after a few hours, can in my opinion be traced back to the initiative of a woman, the Bavarian delegate Ellen Ammann, who was able to proactively and after certain signs recognize the incoming catastrophe and reacted accordingly.”

But Heymann also worried that Ammann’s actions would not be recognized by history. And she proved to be partly right. Apart from a few mentions, Ellen Ammann and her actions on the evening of the 8th November did not find their way into history books. It was only recently that journalists started to acknowledge Ammann’s heroic act. In 2015, her biography became part of the permanent exhibition in the NS Documentation Center in Munich.

Ellen Ammann continued her warnings about the influence of the Nazis until her death in 1932. She did not have to witness how the man she fought against years earlier, managed to take power two months later. The Nazis, however, did not forget her resistance: They destroyed most of the editions of a biography about her, that was set to be released in 1933.

Was it the destruction of her biography that prevented a continued memory of her resistance? Or was it just bad timing, acting before the dark era of Nazi Germany? Maybe it was due to her gender. That is the reason historian Gerlinde Wosgien suggests: In a history written by men, there is no place for women.

Aviad: What a fascinating and inspiring woman! I am wondering now what would have happened if she stayed alive throughout the Nazi period and the war. If she had taken part in any resistance against the Nazi regime? Do you think that her memorization would have been different? I mean, even though she was a woman, Sophie Scholl has a place in the public consciousness. Or was it maybe Ammann's act? A kind of "boring" act to tell heroic stories about later on—answering a phone call? What do you think, Jaya?

Jaya: Well, I think that the lack of attention that Ellen Ammann's resistance received could certainly be connected to the timing of her act. She acted before 1933, the year Hitler took power. And if you take a look at history books, they mostly focus on resistance between 1933 and 1945. So, if she had stayed alive, she might have been remembered—but no one can say that for sure. Another reason that an article in a German newspaper names is that, and I quote: "The historical research was more interested in gunshots, than telephone calls." And they are not wrong. Ammann's resistance wasn't spectacular or dramatic, but that is what fascinates people to a degree. Just look at blockbusters made about resistance against Nazism, like *Operation Valkery*, *Schindler's List* or even *The White Rose* or the fictitious *Inglorious Bastards*. There is none about Ellen Ammann. In general, it took Germany quite a while to establish a remembrance culture including resistance. For about a decade after the war, most of the public did not commemorate resistance, because there was still a feeling of betrayal ingrained in the public consciousness towards the people who resisted the Nazis. Plus, resistance is not something that can be clearly defined. I think that it is a flexible term. In general, that is something we as a society still need to work on.

### **Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi**

Aviad: Our next case is that of Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi—more on that unusually long name later. In the meantime, Yanait will do. She was motivated, day in and day out, by her self-declared historical consciousness. Already early on, she sought to become a notable public figure. Born in 1886 to a religious Jewish family, she spent her formative years trying to find meaning and purpose in the pogrom-ravaged pale of settlement in late 19th century Czarist-Russia. Her life-long search for meaning offers us a chance to look at possibilities for change in collective memory. How will a longer periodization for a subject of study affect matters? Let us take a look at the whole biography.



Jaya: Right! That reminds me of Ammann and her life as well as of my question on how to define resistance! Although I am not quite sure what you mean about periodization?

Aviad: Well, before we go on with the comparison, let me say this: we have mentioned Dan Diner at the beginning of our discussion and his take on the importance of relationships within societies. And we have discussed possible connections with outsider groups' structural-collective identities as well. I agree that these two perspectives help us understand and examine collective memory better. After all, we saw how the exclusion of the cases of Bella Freund and Ellen Ammann from collective memory can fit current politics and gender-norms as well as a sometimes-dubious historiography.

In the case of our next heroine, Yanait, a third component needs to be considered, and that is time—or better yet—periodization. With what I am going to tell you, we move from the singular to the continuum. Meaning: from a specific moment in history to a much longer period—that of a lifelong engagement. I think we can comfortably say that the last two cases squarely fit within the concept of a heroine acting in the right place and at the right time. Indeed, such cases—due to their singular nature and exact sequence of events—illuminate many forgotten or hidden aspects of the historical context. But for Yanait's case it might be more useful to ask: What can be learned from the lifelong story of a heroine?

Roi: Hold on, I am not sure, but I think I heard of her? Wasn't she the First Lady?

Aviad: Right, so, while most Israelis would recognize her by her married surname, which belonged to Israel's second President, Yizhak Ben Zvi, this leaves her to be the First Lady only. But there are also those who have heard of her and usually know something about her training as an agronomist or might even have stumbled on a rumor connecting her with one or two unsolved deaths of more famous Jewish militia men. Specifically, to the notorious death of Yaacov Israel De Han, an orthodox Jew in Jerusalem, and not a militia man, suspected of treason, possibly giving out names and other secrets to the British Mandate's Criminal Investigation Department. Though not fully discredited to this day, these are the more speculative angles to pursue in her story, which also leads us to question the kinds of literary narratives that may keep figures such as Yanait hidden or confined between the lines of the so-called larger story. In any case, from these vignettes alone, we can locate her at the most important lines of the Zionist historical narrative: living off the land, defending it—she even lost her son in the war of 1948—and of course state building.

Her story starts with her failed attempt as a professional revolutionary in the 1905 Russian Revolution. Back then, she still called herself Golda Lishansky. After this failed attempt, she packed up and left for Palestine—during that time under Ottoman rule. For four years she toured the country, up and down, while working in agriculture, establishing with others an independent Jewish militia group, organizing strikes, and advocating for the first communal health care organization for workers. Finally, in 1910, her transformation was complete: Golda Lishansky, the once quaint Jewish girl from Malin near Kiev, had changed her name and became Rachel (after the biblical foremother), Yanait (after the Hasmonaean King Alexander Yanai)—and Ben-Zvi would only be added a few years later after her marriage. Since then and until her death in 1979 she lived and worked mainly in Jerusalem.

Roi: So far, her story resembles some of the other biographies of important Zionist figures. What is so special about her biography?

Aviad: That's right! Usually, the story would now jump to her experience as Israel's First Lady between 1952 and 1963. But there is a much more hidden history here. It is really astonishing that even within the biography of such a celebrated person—a public persona—there are crucial parts which were not made “public”. Her own ideas and initiatives are often underestimated and highly obscure. Especially, when we are talking about the two decades between 1928 and 1948 when she established, worked at, and defended her Farm School for Girls on the outskirts of Jerusalem during—mind you—one of the, if not the most turbulent periods in the modern history of Jerusalem.

During this time, her farm was the first and most stable educational farm for adolescent girls, aged 11 to 17. Her aim was to formally train female teens for agricultural work within the British high school system, and in so doing, allowing for a hidden education of resistance. That was part of what was known as “Hachshara”—a term that can be described as an organic on-the-job training, mixing the life of pioneering on a Kibbutz and holding a militarized outpost. Just to clarify, the Kibbutz is one of Zionism's most famous platforms for settlement. We are talking about a communal settlement sharing income and labor facilities. Everything that goes in and everything that is produced is essentially made for the members of the Kibbutz by the members. Revenues are shared equally within the Kibbutz. But back to the farm: the farm meant having two curricula: the first was a British-approved one that consisted of theoretical studies and field work and a second, hidden one, made up of military-oriented training.

Now, when we think of pioneers in Israel, better known as Chalutzim, you usually don't picture a twelve-year old girl holding a shovel, or a gun. And although, on paper the Zionist political platforms of "Hachshara" seemed to be gender neutral, Yanait had a lot of trouble finding committed programs or funding for her female agricultural training school, let alone for the young mothers she wanted to support. So, she took on heavy risks and loans upon herself, enlisting her reputation and personal ties, and bought a right to lease lands.

Success soon came, as well as disaster: in August of 1929, 50 square km of vegetable rows, apple orchards, and coops of laying chickens were uprooted and burned. The week-long violent 1929 riots, in which hundreds of Jews and Arabs were killed across Palestine, led to several Jewish settlements being abandoned, among them the farm. Only two weeks later, Yanait would return with dozens of her students and staff to plant and rebuild what had been destroyed. She managed to showcase the farm's steadfast stand during two days and nights under fire and was recognized as the first Jerusalem point to be attacked by organized local Arab national militias—a status which later brought her considerable sums with which to build a two-story, modernly-equipped and fortified school building. Truly, she took advantage of a tragedy and transformed the farm from a side project in Jerusalem to a national poster child.

From then and until the 1948 war which affected the farm and eventually drove the school out of its location, Yanait and her committed staff of women mostly had to endure more riots, bombardments, sniper shots, regular theft, and sabotage of its water pipes and crops from neighboring Arab villagers. Despite it all, the farm trained thousands of young women in agriculture, helping many new Kibbutzim and Moshavim rise and develop their land. Moreover, the farm—through its many graduates—had fulfilled revolutionary, even utopian ideals which the Zionist labor movement harbored and held in high esteem, but which were usually restricted to an archetypal, chauvinistic, and highly stratified design. Here, what came to fruition was as close as possible to a feminist reform. Yanait had really done a lot with her farm.

However, as you unearth the extent of her organizational efforts for change and self-empowerment of Jewish women in Mandatory Palestine, their absence in the grand history becomes ever clearer. The lack of research on the farm in the official historiography of the 1948 war, and the non-existent historical conservation on the site of the farm today, stresses a need for further discussions of gender inequality as a theme in the history of Israel.

In the end, though, Yanait did manage to reopen the farm in 1950, in Ein Karem, in West Jerusalem. It is still operating as an agricultural six-year training school for girls, and boys as well. And... What do you think? Was it named after her? No. It wasn't and it still isn't. What does that tell us?

## **Conclusion**

Roi: Okay... that indeed was quite an inspiring life, almost overwhelming! I must say, taking in a life's work as a form of heroism might really enhance our understanding of the spectrum and the definition of a heroine. It is such a different example of heroism compared to Ammann's prevention of the Putsch, or Freund's prompt action. But to construct a hidden-heroine image only based on them might be overly simplistic. However, at least now we are able to appreciate heroism at different moments and throughout time, even across different national and social levels. I mean, it seems to me that every society has its own special way to hide its potential heroines and maybe we can now uncover a great variety of women's heroic acts.

Jaya: But the examples we looked at are only a few examples of hidden history. And I think that, for me at least, the impression left is that these are not, nor can be, only examples of how we should take a closer look at the history we know. All of these stories can be taken as a call, or an inspiration if you will, to examine own lives, our own family's history or the history that we learn in general. And maybe then we can find out why we know what we know, why we learn what we learn about the past. Because history is not always objective. There are so many factors that can determine if acts, events, or people are remembered or forgotten. So, I think we should remain vigilant and watch out for these small things that can make someone a hero or a heroine in the eyes of history. Thank you all for listening to this journey through Jerusalem and München. We hope that now you have some inspiration to look for hidden history in your own city or life.