

America's Jewish Hero

How A Jewish Refugee Became America's Least Likely Military Hero

He wasn't even an American citizen. But Tibor Rubin, a young man who spent the best years of his youth experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust in the infamous Mauthausen concentration camp, was driven by hakaras hatov to repay the USA for liberating him and saving his life. Nothing could stop him—not his two-time rejection by army recruiters, not the threat of front-line battle in Korea, and not even his virulently anti-Semitic commander.

Rubin's story reads like the wildest fiction. It is "unbelievable, fantastic... and all true," said retired US Army Colonel Jack Jacobs in the jacket to a book on Rubin's epic story, Single-Handed. He partook in unbelievably dangerous missions—intentionally orchestrated by his bigoted commander to get him killed! Instead of death and defeat, he achieved remarkable victories. Among his heroic exploits: One time he single-handedly defended a hill, driving away hundreds of attackers, and on another occasion when he was all by himself in a forest he convinced a thousand enemy soldiers surrounding him to surrender to him!

As author Daniel M. Cohen, who researched and wrote about Rubin's amazing story, tells Zman, "This guy isn't a one in a million. He's a one. There is no one else who did what he did."

After shunning the limelight and protesting that he was merely doing his duty, Tibor Rubin was finally recognized with America's highest military honor, the Medal of Honor... more than 50 years later.

Tibor Rubin pinched himself to make sure he was truly awake. He could not believe that this was really happening. He tried to tell himself that it was just a bad dream; his raw nerves were causing his mind to play games with him.

Unfortunately, it was no dream.

Just a second earlier the cloudy skies had suddenly cleared, revealing the moon shining high above. Rubin peered down into the valley below and was shocked to see the shadows of hundreds of enemy soldiers racing in the direction of the hill. He was all alone on the hill, hiding in a pit where he stood guard over a massive store of arms and ammunition for the US Army.

When they arrived at the foot of the hill, the enemy soldiers stopped for a moment to catch their breaths and take up positions. Then the commanding officer blew on a whistle and a bugler played the war call signaling the commencement of the attack. Now the enemy soldiers began rushing up the hillside, screaming, "Yay-yay! Yay-yay! Yay-yay!" like wild animals.

Rubin watched the soldiers converging on him from all sides, some crouched on all four like a swarm of irate insects. He knew it would not be an easy death that awaited him. The communist North Korean forces took sadistic delight in torturing their victims. He knew he had to do something fast. But what? What could a single American soldier do against a battalion?

Everything had begun the previous afternoon, when Rubin's division received an order from headquarters to beat a hasty retreat. A massive brigade of enemy soldiers was heading for the front passing their way, and the small American force was too puny to hold them off.

Rubin's commanding officer was a rabid anti-Semite who ordered him to remain behind and guard the arsenal of weapons, ammunition and bombs that could not be evacuated in time. The officer promised Rubin that a convoy of military trucks would return before nightfall to retrieve the materials and relieve him of his precarious duty.

Well, night fell and no convoy showed up. The commander fully intended for Rubin to be murdered by the enemy forces that were swiftly approaching.

Rubin spent the first part of the night alone in the total blackness of the hillside pit fearing the worst and pouring out his heart in prayer. He recited *Tehillim* and begged the One Above to protect from whatever unknown threats surrounded him. Now, however, the threat had made itself known and the enemy would overrun his position within minutes.

How ironic, Rubin thought to himself. He had faced his imminent death so many times in childhood. After being liberated from a Nazi concentration camp he felt so much gratitude that he vowed to fight in the US Army himself. And now he was destined to suffer a bitter and tragic end—arranged by none other than a US Army officer.

Village of Pásztó

Tibor Rubin was born in 1929 in the Hungarian village of Pásztó, where around 120 Jews lived, approximately 60 miles from the capital city Budapest.

"I had a nice Jewish family," he says. "We got along well with the neighbors and life was very pleasant. We didn't bother anyone and no one bothered us, despite the fact that anti-Semitism was ever-present."

Tibor's father, Ferencz, a shoemaker, worked hard to support his family and provide them with a proper Jewish education. Tibor and his five siblings were sent to the village *melamed* every day and on *Shabbos* their father took them to *shul*. Tibor remembers that there were two congregations. After the *Shabbos* meal they were expected to study Torah rather than go outside to play.

"He was raised in an orthodox house," Daniel Cohen, author of *Single Handed: the Inspiring True Story of Tibor "Teddy" Rubin—Holocaust Survivor, Korean War Hero, and Medal of Honor Recipient*, tells **Zman**. "His father was a POW in World War One and his Judaism is what kept him alive."



Tibor Rubin with the Medal of Honor he received after 55 years.

The Americans Are Here!

May 5, 1945

The long-awaited moment had arrived. This was the moment for which the thousands of prisoners had been praying and hoping against hope, while thousands of others had given up: the liberation.

The Nazi guards scampered off in all directions as the American troops drew inexorably closer. The sounds of the approaching tanks and the booms of their canons were unmistakable. A young boy named Tibor Rubin stood at the gates of the camp, watching as the American GIs came closer and closer to the sick and emaciated prisoners. Many were so weak that it took all their strength just to stand on their feet so they could witness the miracle unfolding before them.

Rubin had spent 14 terrible months in the camp. In those 14 months he had seen the worst depravity humanity can muster and had faced imminent death on a daily basis. The Jews who had been caught with him had

died off one by one, either through one of the horrible deaths that the Nazis devised for them or by giving up hope and succumbing. To survive one needed a very strong will. You had to take the effort to remove the lice and parasitic insects that consumed the prisoners alive. You had to work hard so your life maintained some minimal value in the eyes of the Nazis. Rubin was imbued with a strong will and that's one of the reasons he survived through liberation.

Two of his brothers and one sister also emerged alive from the Holocaust. Their parents and remaining two sisters were among the six million victims of Hitler's Final Solution. Ironically, Ferencz Rubin was a war hero who had fought bravely on the Eastern Front in World War I as a soldier of the Austro-Hungarian army, which was allied with the German army. He spent six grueling years as a Russian prisoner-of-war. None of that mattered to the Nazis, however. All they cared about was that he was a Jew.

As he watched the American soldiers march into the camp, Tibor Rubin was overcome by gratitude. First and foremost, gratitude to *Hashem* for enabling him to live until liberation, and also tremendous gratitude for *Hashem's* messengers, the soldiers who saved him. On the spot, Rubin vowed to himself, "When I leave here and I will be strong enough to stand on my feet, I will join the American army and pay back my debt to them. They rescued me from this nightmare and I will rescue others."



Rubin is interviewed by reporter Daniel Cohen, who shared many details of the story with **Zman**.