

Zelensky: More than Something of a Hero



by Michael Curtis

They come against us in great insolence and lawlessness to destroy us, do not be afraid of them.

Where are the heroes of today? They were present in every region, time period, culture and creed. In the distant past, Achilles, Odysseus, Hercules. More recently, Mahatma Gandhi: 1869-1948, Indian lawyer, anti-colonial nationalist, advocate of non-violent resistance; Florence Nightingale, 1820-1910, the Lady with the Lamp; Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1965, led the nation as President and preserved during the Civil War; Nelson Mandela, 1918-2013, anti-apartheid revolutionary and political leader, first president of South Africa; Winston Churchill 1874-1965, successful leader and Prime Minister with inspiring rhetoric of Britain during World War II. Raoul Wallenberg, 1912-?, Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis in Hungary; Vaclav Havel, 1936-2011, playwright and president of Czechoslovakia,

courageous fighter for freedom.

All exemplify some of the features that characterize heroes: courage, bravery, boldness, leader of a worthy cause, personification of nobility and civilized behavior, performing acts that involve personal risks or sacrifices, no expectation of reward, inspiration to others.

In our cancel culture era, heroes are not evident, and supposed past heroes have been toppled: Confederate generals, Christopher Columbus, Spanish Conquistadors. The implication for the topplers is that designation of heroes is the result of social and political constructions, linked to the norms and values of a particular time. Moreover, because of the impact of social media on opinion, the incessant stream of information and misinformation, misgivings about the actions of officials of government and organizations, avoidance of action on issues, and perhaps the declining quality of elected representatives in democratic societies, no one individual or few are likely to remain as a hero on a pedestal for long. Thomas Jefferson, we now know, was a slave owner, and Martin Luther King, Jr., courageous fighter against segregation, discrimination, and racism, had a weakness for beautiful women.

Of course, in everyday life, heroic deeds tend to be underrated or unappreciated. This is often the case with the teacher who helps a handicapped student, or the police officer or fire fighter who risks life to protect others. These individuals, heroes in their own way, can serve as models for teaching, good citizenship, or desirable political involvement, though not heralded.

The surprise in the last two months is the emergence of an improbable person to be the outstanding heroic figure in the world. He is not the archetypal protagonist, a legendary warrior or king, or one resembling King Arthur searching for the Holy Grail, but a relatively obscure figure of modest

background, inexperienced and imperfect. He may not be an angel because angels are so few, but until the day that one comes along Volodymyr Zelensky will do.

In the Jewish Passover story, the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt can be interpreted in two ways: the story of the liberation of a specific group of people from the rule of a brutal ruler in Egypt by their ability to defend itself and spiritual help; or as a symbol of an act of universal liberation from oppression. Zelensky is the modern hero exemplifying both themes: the defender of his country and people from the aim of the war criminal Vladimir Putin and his barbaric and inhuman forces for the total destruction of a people, a state, a culture; and also, more than something of a hero, the spokesperson for the cause for freedom in the whole free world, the moral conscience of the West .

Zelensky is a fighter for the truth and for civilization. He started as an actor and comedian. His actions as president of Ukraine echo the closing words of his satirical TV show "Servant of the People", "finally Ukraine is united, this is our victory." Zelensky is fighting for his country in real life because "our weapon is truth, and our truth is that Ukraine is our country, and we will defend it." His courageous leadership has not only inspired his country, infusing Ukrainians with a valiant state of mind similar to that of Americans after Pearl Harbor and 9/11, and of the British during the blitz of the Nazis. He has also led the free world to understand and act against the dominant force of evil , to supply weapons to Ukraine and to limit Russian political and economic activities.

Wearing his military green T shirt, and unshaven face, Zelensky is not the image of Winston Churchill with his bow tie, ever present cigar, and public sang-froid, nor comparable in his rhetorical masterful eloquence, but he is equally skilled in the art of communication, including borrowing and plagiarizing Churchill's bravado, "we will fight until the

end, at sea, in the air. We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost.”

The traditional hero experiences great trials and tribulations, and in the process finds in himself hidden strengths, and new powers that transform himself and the people for whom he becomes the embodiment. During the weeks of fighting against the Russian aggression, Zelensky has transformed himself, become the hero for the whole world, with the sensible admonition to call a spade a spade, and recognize the nature of the enemy. Zelensky has been the epitome of bravery, telling the world that “The Russians will see our faces, not our backs.” He is the man who calls for ammunition for defense of his country, not willing to accept a ride to safety. This hero made a difference, exhorting people, fighting for a just cause, and getting other nations to help. With high standards of valor and bravery, he embodies a cause larger than himself, the cause of civilization.

Zelensky is of Jewish descent, if not religiously devout. He may be viewed in a germane parallel with a historic Jewish hero. Judah Maccabee, the leader of the Jewish guerrilla freedom fighters who fought the Seleucid Greek occupiers in Judea in 167 BC. After the reign of Alexander the Great, the Seleucid dynasty won control of Judea. When Antiochus IV in 175 BC became ruler, he persecuted Jews and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem, among other things, putting a pig on the altar. A major villain, Antiochus was the Putin of his day. This outrage at the Temple led to Jewish resistance led by the Hasmonean family headed by the Jewish priest Mattathias and his five sons. The father died in 166 BC and his son Judah took command. A brave leader, an inspiring leader, with exceptional military talent, Judah was a master of guerrilla warfare, out maneuvering the larger, better equipped, Seleucid forces, winning a number of battles including the battle at Beth Zur, tearing down the altar of Zeus and restoring the damaged Temple.

The parallel is striking. The Seleucid ruler, like Putin today, was a tyrant, probably mad, whose intention was to exterminate the Jewish people. He had underestimated the strength of the Hasmonean movement, and above all the fighting spirit of the Jews who restored glory and liberty to Jerusalem.

The event is remembered and celebrated annually in Hanukkah, the festival of lights, commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem, and the rededication of the Second Temple.

Judah was a man who made a difference. He was killed in battle in 161 BC, a central figure in the resistance to a brutal ruler. Zelensky, now making a difference, is implicitly the descendant of the Maccabees, a hero like Judah, with the heart of a lion leading the resistance to the modern brutal ruler. He is the improbable hero who has ascended to greatness, the symbol not only of Ukrainian unity, but of the best principles of a civilized world.