

Szenes, Hannah

(1921--1944), One of the Jewish parachutists from Palestine sent by the YISHUV leadership on rescue missions in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Born in Budapest to an assimilated Jewish family of writers, musicians, and poets, Szenes too became a poet at a young age, writing in Hungarian at first and later in Hebrew. Soon she also became a Zionist, and in 1939 she immigrated to Palestine. Two years later she joined Kibbutz Sedot Yam, near the coastal town of Caesarea.

In 1943 Szenes volunteered for a newly founded group of parachutists who were to be sent on rescue missions behind enemy lines in occupied Europe. Her hope was to reach her native Hungary and help aid Jews there. However, she also felt that even if she did not end up rescuing Jews, she and her fellow parachutists would be an inspiring and morale-raising symbol of hope to the Jews of Europe. In March 1944, just a week before the Germans occupied Hungary, Szenes parachuted into Yugoslavia. For the next three months, she and other Palestinian parachutists lived with Yugoslav partisans. In early June Szenes crossed over the border into Hungary with a radio transmitter. She was caught immediately. The Germans put her in prison where they tortured her brutally to find out the code for her radio transmitter. However, Szenes did not break, even when the Germans threatened the life of her mother.

After five months in prison, Szenes was put on trial. She defended herself bravely; however, she was convicted of treason against Hungary, and executed by firing squad.

The life of Hannah Szenes, a modern Jewish hero, has been chronicled in plays, books, and even a movie. Her poems and writings have been widely published, and they are still often read or sung when memorializing the holocaust. A village in Israel, Yad Hannah, is named for her. (see also Parachutists, Jewish.)