

Manuel Quezon: Little Known Savior of Jews

Born of the sun he travelled a short while towards the sun and left the vivid air signed with his honor.

by Michael Curtis



Manuel Quezon

At the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 2020, held at the site of the former death camp, the more than 200 survivors out of the 7000 prisoners alive at the liberation, as well as distinguished individuals, many overcome with emotion, spoke of and gave testimonies of the horrors and tragedies they experienced during their incarceration in the death camp. At another ceremony at Yad Vashem, World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, Prince Charles spoke of the magnitude of the genocide that was visited upon the Jewish people, which defies comprehension and “which can make those of us who live in the shadow of those indescribable events feel hopelessly inadequate.”

By coincidence in the same month of January, the indescribable events and the horrors of the factory of death that can never be forgotten were the background of two new fictional presentations, a play and a film, alluding to the Holocaust.

On January 25, 2020 a play titled *Leopoldstadt* by the 81 year old Tom Stoppard, arguably the greatest living playwright, opened in London. Born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia the then named Tomas Straussler moved, to escape the Nazis, with his family to Singapore, then India, and finally Britain. Stoppard's previous plays, intelligent and witty, have often discussed the collision of ideas and themes; his play *Arcadia* dealt with tension between classicism and romanticism, art and nature, the 19th and the 20th centuries. In these plays and screen and TV plays he wrote, Stoppard never used or explored his Jewish background. Latterly, he said that his mother who had no religion never talked about the past until she was 80 and only then informed him that all his four Jewish grandparents and her sisters had been murdered in the Holocaust.

This revelation changed the way he saw himself and led him to think about the Holocaust. His new play is not autobiographical, but its subject was suggested by the experience of the Jewish people. The play *Leopoldstadt*, the name is that of the former Viennese Jewish ghetto, is set in the first half of 20th century vibrant Vienna. It deals with a number of generations of two intermarried Jewish families, coping with what it meant to be Jewish and living in a culture where ten percent of the population was Jewish, that was destroyed by the Nazis. Stoppard expresses the progress of Viennese Jews through a character: "My grandfather wore a caftan, my father went to the opera in a top hat, and I, a factory owner, have the singers to dinner." The Jews in Vienna, as elsewhere in Europe, were successful but they were doomed. Stoppard's personal feelings of grief and horror of the Holocaust made him sadly wonder if "ordinary people would

be capable of the same genocidal actions of which we are all capable."

The question has been considered by many writers, of whom three may be mentioned: Christopher Browning in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*