

Maine's Unrealized Human Potential

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The story of Felix Zandman ought to inspire Maine businesspeople to look both inside ourselves and outside our borders to find greatness.

Felix Zandman was born and raised in Grodno, Poland, and likely would have lived a quiet, comfortable life in the family business had the Nazis and their local enablers not exterminated 28,900 of the town's 29,000 Jewish citizens.

But, just a step ahead of their pursuers and sheltered by non-Jewish neighbors, Zandman and three family members surreptitiously dug a hole in the ground—a grave of sorts—in which they lived for more than a year before escaping Poland and surfacing safely in France.

Think of it—a year underground—in hiding from certain death. And what did Zandman do with his time? He studied.

His uncle, “interred” with him, schooled him in algebra, trigonometry, physics—anything and everything Zandman could absorb. There was little else to do, and Zandman immersed himself as if his life depended on it.

By the time he emerged from the grave, he had amassed and internalized an enormous body of knowledge. When he was admitted to the University of Nancy in France, he distinguished himself immediately, earning degrees in mechanical engineering and physics, ultimately receiving the award of Student of the Century. He went on to earn a doctorate in physics from the Sorbonne.

In 1956, Zandman moved to the United States, and within a few years founded a company he called Vishay, after the small town in Lithuania where his grandmother was born. That's the same Vishay as in Vishay Sprague, the electronics company located in Sanford, Maine, that is part of the multibillion-dollar Vishay conglomerate.

Felix Zandman died this past June at the age of 83. Today, Vishay has 22,000 employees and manufacturing facilities in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Israel. It is hard to imagine a more unlikely or inspiring success story.

I'm mentioning Zandman, however, not simply because he recently passed away, nor because the

company he founded has operations in Maine. In fact, his life and legacy are far more important than that, far more important even than his contributions to science (scores of patents), and far more important than the jobs he created.

Zandman's life is an example of the incalculable potential of human life, the wondrous creativity within each of us. And it is an example of the staggering loss we suffer when we exclude or extinguish the potential of the strangers among us.

What else did the Nazis extinguish when they eviscerated Europe? What scientific, artistic, and economic contributions to humanity might have been made, but will never see the light of day?

And now, what contributions to humankind can we make possible, if we but open our doors to those who, but for safe harbor here, would likely perish in yet another holocaust?

We must work to see that the strangers among us are welcomed, that the creativity within them is fostered, that educational opportunities are available, and that we in the majority culture reach out to them, so that they—and thus our society as a whole—can flourish.

Ten years ago, when Somali, Sudanese, Rwandan, and Congolese immigrants began to arrive in Maine, many here didn't know how to react or behave. We allowed ourselves to be put off by unfamiliar clothing and customs, by languages that seemed impenetrable, by communities that kept to themselves.

Today, however, our workforce benefits from their participation. Our schools are enriched by their children. And our futures are brightened by the many young citizens earning degrees and immersing themselves in their studies much the way that Felix Zandman applied himself decades ago.

Take a trip to Southern Maine Community College and see who's hitting the books. Have a look at the local papers and see who's participating in community events and neighborhood outreach. Come June, see who's going on to four-year colleges and universities.

There may never be another Felix Zandman, but there are hundreds, even thousands, in our communities with much to give.

Somewhere in Lewiston, perhaps, sits a student capable of solving our most intractable problems. A young man working in Maine's blueberry barrens may someday invent a new medicine, or write a symphony.

What despots and dictators have tried to extinguish is nothing less than the unrealized potential of human creativity. To our great good fortune we have among us many who are aching to contribute and anxious to achieve their own dreams.

This state is large enough to accommodate them. I hope we will be big enough to accept them.

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