

Bearing Witness: A Purim Story from the Holocaust
PURIM IN DACHAU By Solly Ganor

They arrived from Auschwitz in several groups. Each group counted about twenty people. Of course, they didn't look like people. They looked more like walking skeletons. They had triangular faces with pointed chins, and sunken cheeks. Even the lips had shrunken to thin blue lines. The only prominent feature were their eyes; they were unusually large and with a strange sheen, almost luminous. They were known in concentration camp slang, as 'Muselman'. That was usually the last stage before death.

They spoke Yiddish with an accent, which to us Lithuanian Jews, sounded strange.

They told us that they came from the ghetto of Lodz through Auschwitz, before they were sent to our camp. Our camp was known as the 'Outer camp of Dachau, number 10' and it was situated near the picturesque town of Utting, by lake Amersee.

Our camp was sitting in the middle of a small forest with surrounding green meadows and beautiful landscapes. I remember the day when we were brought there, I thought to myself, 'How can anything bad happen to us among all this beauty'?.

I soon found out that the beauty was in the landscape only. The Germans in charge of us were sadists and murderers. The Lodz people fell into the same deceptive trap. They thought that after Auschwitz, our camp looked like paradise. Most of them died soon after their arrival, from hard labor, beatings and starvation, still they preferred to die here than in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

It was from them that we heard the incredible stories of gas chambers, and crematoriums, where thousands of our people were murdered every day.

Some of them told us that they were standing naked before the gas chambers when they were suddenly ordered to get dressed and were sent to us .

Towards the end of February 1945, there were only a few of them left alive. One of them was known as the 'Chaim the Rabbi'. We never found out whether he was actually a rabbi, but he always washed his hands and made a bracha (blessing) before eating. He knew the dates of the Jewish calendar, and also knew all the prayers by heart. From time to time when the Germans were not looking, he would invite us to participate in the evening prayers,.

Our Jewish camp commander, Burgin, heard about him and tried to get him easier jobs. Most people died when they had to carry a hundred pounds of cement sacks on their backs, or other chores of heavy labor. He wouldn't have lasted a day on a job like this. He once told me that if he would survive he would get married and have at least a dozen children.

Around the end of February, we were given a day off. It was a Sunday.

The camp was covered with snow, but here and there the first signs of spring was in the air. We heard vague rumors of the American break through into Germany and a glimmer of hope was kindled in our hearts. After breakfast, consisting of a slice of moldy bread, a tiny piece of margarine, and brown water, known as 'Ersatz Coffee', we returned to our barrack to get some extra sleep.

Suddenly we noticed 'Chaim the Rabbi' standing in the snow and shouting " Haman to the gallows! Haman to the gallows!"

On his head he had a paper crown made of a cement sack, and he was draped in a blanket which had cut out stars from the same paper attached to it.

We stood like petrified before this strange apparition, barely able to trust our eyes, while he performed a dance in the snow, singing:

"I am Achashwerosch, Achashwerosh, the king of the Persians."

Then he stood still straightened himself out, chin pointed to the sky, his right arm extended in an imperial gesture and shouted:

"Haman to the gallows! Haman to the gallows! And when I say Haman to the gallows, we all know which Haman we are talking about!"

We were sure that he has lost his wits, as so many did in these impossible times.

By now there was about fifty of us standing gaping at the "Rabbi", when he said:

"Yiddn vos iz mit ajch! Haint is Purim, lomir Shpielen a purim Shpiel!" "Fellow Jews, what is the matter with you?! today is Purim, let us play a Purim Shpiel!"

Then it dawned on us that back home, a million years ago, this was the time of the year when we children were dressing up fro Purim, playing draidlach, and eating 'Hommen Taschen'.

It took the 'Rabbi' to remember the exact date by the Jewish calendar when Purim was.

He then divided the roles of Ester Hamalka, Mordechai, Vashti and Hamman among the onlookers..

I was honored to receive the role of Mordechai, and we all ended up dancing in the snow. And so we had our Purim Shpiel in Dachau.

But that was not the end of the story. The "Rabbi" promised us that we will get today our 'Shalach Manot', and we thought that it was hardly likely to happen.

But, miracle of miracles, the same afternoon, a delegation of the International Red Cross, came to the camp. It was the first time that they bothered about us. Still, we welcomed them with open arms, because they brought us the "Shalach Manot" the 'Rabbi' promised. Each one of us received a parcel, containing, a tin of sweet condensed milk, a small bar of chocolate, a box of sugar cubes, and a pack of cigarettes. It is impossible to describe our joy! Here we were starving to death as suddenly on Purim, we received these heavenly gifts. Since then we never doubted the 'Rabbi' anymore.

His prediction also came true. Two months later 'Haman-Hitler' went to the gallows, and shot himself in Berlin, while we, those of us who were still alive, were rescued by the American army, on May 2, 1945.

I lost track of the 'Rabbi' on our 'Death March', from Dachau to Tyrol, but I hope that he survived and had many children as he always wanted. I always remember him when Purim comes around, for the unforgettable 'Purim Shpiel' in Dachau.

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