

Bearing Witness
Passover Seder in Dachau

By Holocaust survivor,
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Exactly sixty-two years ago, on March 27, 1945, we held a Passover Seder in Dachau, the notorious Nazi concentration camp. We were half starved, barely able to walk, yet we held on.

Of course, it was not a real Seder; it was just a symbolic Seder, yet those of us who participated in it felt a tremendous spiritual uplift that gave us enough strength to continue.

'Passover in Dachau,' is not a story of the horrors we endured, but a story of Jewish faith, spirit, strength and stamina that has helped us survive two thousand years of persecution and prejudice. It tells of a man who made a difference even while we dwelt in the Nazi hell. We only knew him as the "Rebbe" and that he came to us from the Lodz Ghetto, through Auschwitz.

Soon there won't be any of us left to bear witness to the murder of the Jews of Europe; therefore, as painful as it may be, we have to tell our stories so that future generations will fully understand the events of the Holocaust.

Six million is a big number. I have heard many say that it is a number beyond comprehension. It is only through our individual stories that the emotional impact of the Holocaust can be fully appreciated. It is our duty to bear witness. And that is what this story is all about.

The Passover Seder in Dachau.
March 27, 1945

About sixty miles southwest of Munich, the capital city of Bavaria, lies a picturesque little town called Utting situated on the banks of a small lake called Amersee. Today, it is a well-known summer resort.

Before the Nazi era, the town was known as an artists' town where some well-known musicians, poets and artists lived. I was told that Kurt Weil, the famous composer lived there before he was forced to flee for his life to the United States. Who could have imagined that in the midst of all that beauty the Nazis would establish a concentration camp, part of the satellite camps of the notorious concentration camp of Dachau? To us it was known as Lager X, Utting.

I was seventeen years old, in July 1944, when they brought me here from Lithuania. I was to become a Jewish slave laborer in a factory that produced concrete parts for the nearby site of a huge underground factory which was under construction. The factory was to produce the fighter jet plane known as the Messerschmit M-62. Many of my friends worked and died on that construction site, which was known as Lager 1, Landsberg.

I managed to keep a small diary while we were there.

Utting, August 1945

It was a warm day in August, with a cool breeze blowing from a nearby lake. Later we found out that the name of the lake was Amersee, and the camp they took us to was near a small town called Utting.

As we marched down the small roads and byways of this beautiful countryside, we almost forgot that we were Jewish prisoners condemned to extermination by Hitler.

"How could so much evil dwell amidst so much beauty?" I wondered.

I tried to imagine that I was a tourist, and for lunch Father would take me to a fancy hotel where we would eat our fill of the most gorgeous meats, poultry, baked potatoes, and white rolls. Soft, round white rolls that would melt in my mouth. These images only depressed me and I thought I'd better keep my wits about me. As usual, I kept my eyes open for opportunities in this new place. I knew that the first day in the camp was crucial to getting work where one could survive and what is more important, with an opportunity to steal

food. After a short walk, we were put on a local train that brought us to our destination, Lager X, an outer camp of Dachau. Here, we were received by SS guards who didn't seem as threatening as the ones in Stutthof. They led us into a wooded area, in the middle of which was a large clearing. In the clearing, we saw the camp; our final destination until the end of the war, for better or for worse.

I will skip eight months of the horrors, beatings and starvation we suffered in that camp. Many of us died. My book, 'Light One Candle,' published in English, German and Japanese, give a full description of those events.

I will concentrate on a part of my story that could not be included in the published manuscript due to limited space. This story is about Passover in Lager X.

The Rebbe

Around the middle of March, 1945, we suddenly saw small planes with blue stars on their wings flying low over our heads. They machine-gunned everything that was moving. The German guards and foremen scattered in all directions.

We stood as if we were petrified, gaping at them. We didn't care if they hit us as long as they killed some of our torturers. The planes were a total and exciting surprise to us.

During the previous eight-months, we had only seen huge bombers flying high in the sky, probably towards Munich and other German towns.

Gans, the 'Strategist,' said that these were American fighter planes, and the fact that we saw them for the first time in our area, flying so low, indicated that the front was coming nearer.

That same evening the "Rebbe" came to see us in our barracks. He was the same weird man from Lodz who staged the Purim party and almost got us killed by the guards. We never found out if he was really a rabbi, but we all called him "Rebbe."

He knew all the prayers by heart and urged us to keep the faith.

He had grown a bit thinner since the escapade of the Purim party, but he seemed in better shape than most of the Jews who arrived from the Lodz Ghetto. (I described that party last year, as Purim in Dachau.)

Burgin, the head kapo, gave him the job of burying the dead and he had plenty to do, as more and more of our prisoners died. It was a dreadful job, but it was better than carrying hundred pound cement sacks on your back. He called himself "Hevre Kadishe" and was known to say Kaddish after every burial, which earned him our respect.

Everyone considered him weird, but he was a kind man and always smiled, which was another reason why we thought he was crazy.

We were sitting around the small round iron stove trying to warm ourselves when he came into our barracks. He smelled of the dead. We were well acquainted with that smell.

"Yidden, peisach kumt in zwelf tug un men darf baken matze,"
("Jews, Passover is coming in twelve days and we have to bake matzos.")

He spoke Yiddish differently from our Lithuanian Yiddish and sometimes it was difficult to understand him.

He also had the strange habit of calling us "Yidden" and never called us by our names.

We just looked at him in astonishment.

In the last few weeks, our situation had deteriorated. The watery soup we got for lunch became even more watery, and the daily portion of bread became thin and quite often green with mold.

The German overseers showed increasing nervousness and were even crueler, beating us at every opportunity. We knew that the Allies were somewhere in Germany, but whether we could hold out till they reached our camp was doubtful.

After the incident we had with the "Rebbe" on Purim, we weren't too surprised that he would come up with another loony idea.

Then he gave us a sly look and wagged his forefinger at us.

"Let me tell you, Yidden, we shall soon celebrate not only 'Itzios Mizraim' but also 'Itzios Deutschland.'" He said this and gave a short high pitched laugh.

("We shall soon celebrate not only the exodus from Egypt, but also the exodus from Germany.")

We thought that his statement, "Exodus from Germany," instead of liberation, was part of his strange behavior.

"From your mouth to G-d's ears, but how on earth do you know that Pesach is in twelve days?" my father asked in surprise.

"I know because it is four days before the end of March!" he said triumphantly.

That didn't any make more sense to us than his precise knowledge of Jewish holidays. We hardly knew what day it was, let alone the days of our holidays.

"And to where is this exodus taking us from Germany? Shall we cross the Red Sea to the promised land?" Haim asked with derision.

"No, we shall cross the Mediterranean to the promised land, young man," he answered quietly.

We looked at each other. Perhaps his ideas were not so crazy. We all thought that if we would survive this purgatory, the only place left for us to go was Palestine.

"So, how about some flour? I will bake the matzos and make the proper blessing to make it kosher," he said, rubbing his hands.

"For G-d's sake, Rebbe, where do you expect us to get flour? We are all starving here and you come with your crazy ideas," one of the prisoners said in an irritated voice.

"Look, if you want to have an exodus from Germany, we must have matzos," he said, stubbornly. "Or there won't be an exodus from Germany," he said, sticking up his chin.

Then he suddenly he pointed his finger at me and said, "You work in the German OT kitchen, you bring us the flour!"

I looked at him in astonishment.

My father got really mad at him.

"You want my son to risk his life to steal flour from the Germans for your Matzohs?" Father practically shouted at him.

"For our Matzahs," the "Rebbe" said calmly. "He is the only one who can get the flour."

I thought about the cellar in the German kitchen, where they kept the foodstuffs. It was not only under lock and key, but the cook was always hanging around. There was no way I could get into the cellar, and if I did, I certainly wouldn't bother with flour, but would steal food to help us survive.

The "Rebbe," as if sensing my thoughts, held up his hand.

"I have something that may help you get the flour," he said, and took out from under his armpit a small rag tied with a string.

He carefully untied it and took out two objects. He put it on his left palm and stuck it under my nose. I recoiled in disgust. They were two foul smelling teeth with some gold attached to them.

We were all stunned. We all knew that he buried the dead. When he saw our looks he smiled.

"It's not what you think. I didn't pull any teeth from the dead. It was Zundel who gave it to me before he died. I promised him that I would barter the teeth for flour to make matzahs for the Passover Seder. You wouldn't want me to go back on the promise I made to a dying Jew?" he said looking at us accusingly. "Don't you understand? Pesach is the holiday of our freedom from slavery, aren't we slaves here for the Nazis? You know very well that this may be our salvation and the gate for our exodus from Germany."

To this day, I don't know how I agreed to the Rebbe's crazy idea. Religion was the last thing on our minds under the circumstances. To some extent, we blamed G-d for what happened to the Jewish people in Europe.

There was one sentence in the Haggadah that especially angered us: "In every generation our enemies rise to destroy us, but the Almighty always saves us from their hands." He certainly was not saving any of us, including the millions of children who were murdered. Yet it was our belief and tradition that had brought us that far.

The next day, I took the gold teeth with me to the German kitchen where I was working. The cook was a mean old German who always cursed us and would beat us with his iron soup ladle. But he never really hurt us.

How should I approach him? What should I tell him? "Here are two gold teeth extracted from a dead Jew. Can you please give me some flour to bake some matzohs for Passover?" He would probably deliver me to the SS guards to be shot.

The more I thought about it, the crazier it sounded. Finally, I decided to abandon the idea.

When the cook saw me he called me over.

"You can start cleaning the mess hall and then the wash room."

His tone of voice was much milder than before. I felt a difference in his voice. While he spoke to me, he kept looking at the sky. Sure enough, a squadron of American fighter planes came roaring over the roofs. I saw them wheeling down towards the railroad tracks and heard their cannons rattling, followed by loud explosions. They must have been attacking some nearby target. It was an incredible sight and made my heart leap with joy.

The cook almost fainted with fright and ran down to the cellar where the food was stored. I ran after him, but he began shouting, "Get out! Get out! Get out! I saw you gloating when the planes came over." He screamed at me. I quickly got out of the cellar hoping he would calm down after a while. I had made a huge mistake by making him angry.

I called out to him and begged his forgiveness. "I was just frightened of the attacking planes, please forgive me," I said.

We looked at each other. I could see in his eyes that he was thinking the same thing as I, "Soon the Americans will be here."

It was then that I suddenly blurted out the story of the Passover holiday and that we needed flour to bake matzahs. It was as if the "Rebbe" had taken control of my tongue and made me say these things.

Then I slowly opened the rag the "Rebbe" had given me and extended the two gold teeth to him.

For a while he looked at me as if I had gone mad. Then I saw some recognition in his eyes.

"Is that the holiday Passover when our Lord Jesus sat with his disciples and ate the unleavened bread at the last supper? Is the unleavened bread what you Jews call matzahs?"

It was my turn to be surprised. I knew that he was an observant Catholic by the cross he wore around his neck, and I saw him cross himself several times when the American planes came over.

This was an entirely unexpected turn of events.

As children we were taught that Jesus was always connected with trouble for the Jewish people. But if Jesus helped us get the flour, it was all right with me.

I was beginning to be hopeful. He looked at the gold teeth for a while but didn't take them.

He didn't say anything more and told me to clean up the mess hall and the wash room.

Before we went back to the camp, he came out of the kitchen and gave me a small paper bag full of white flour.

"I think our Lord would want you to have matzahs for your holiday. After all he was one your people. Sometimes we forget that."

I don't know why he gave me the flour, perhaps he thought that I would say a good word for him when the Americans came, or perhaps he did it out of religious convictions. The fact was that he didn't take the gold teeth.

Whatever the reasons, the "Rebbe" had his flour and, on the small iron stove, he baked us little white wafers that reminded us vaguely of matzahs. They had small holes in them and were slightly burned.

It was on March 27, 1945, when he brought the matzahs and declared that the Passover Seder would now begin.

"Out of the seven ingredients needed to conduct the Seder, we now only have two. Matzahs and Marror, but the Almighty will understand."

"Rebbe', where is the Marror (bitter herb) that you mentioned?" we asked him.

He looked at us. "Our lives in this camp is the Marror; it is bitter enough."

He then divided the matzah, gave each of us a piece and made us say the blessings.

"Since you are the youngest of the group, you will ask the four 'shales mah nishtana,' (the four questions)." To my surprise, I remembered most of them and sing-songed the questions with the help of the others. We did not hide the 'Afikomen' because there were no children in our camp. The children had all been sent to Auschwitz to be gassed.

We had to go to work the next day and we were hungry and dead tired, but we joined the "Rebbe" in holding some kind of a Seder. He remembered most of the Haggadah by heart; so did my father who had studied in a yeshiva when he was a boy.

Some of the other participants also knew parts of the Haggadah. Some of us joined in saying the blessings, but we were all asleep before the "Rebbe" finished chanting the Haggadah.

I vaguely remembered him singing Chad Gad Yah.

At the end, he made a short prayer in Yiddish:

"Please, forgive us, Oh Master of the Universe, for conducting such a poor Passover Seder service. But it was the best we could do, and please deliver us, Oh Lord, from the hands of our enemies who rose up, once again, in this generation to destroy us." The Rebbe's seder had double significance for us: We all felt as if we were there at "Itzias Miszraim," and we believed the "Rebbe" that we would also be at "Itzias Deutschland."

He woke me before he left and told me, "you deserve a special blessing for bringing the flour for the Matzahs. You will be among those who will soon celebrate the exodus from Germany to the Holy Land."

I didn't tell him about my conversation with the cook and that Jesus had something to do with getting us the flour for the Matzahs. I doubt that he would have appreciated the help of Jesus.

About a month later, the war was over and we were rescued by the US army. It was May 2, 1945.

The "Rebbe" kept his promise and most of us who participated in that Seder in Dachau, survived the Holocaust and left for Israel, fulfilling his prophecy of "Itzios Deutschland, The Exodus from Germany."

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