

Yaffa Eliach :
Hasidic tales of the
Holocaust

When Rabbi Israel Spira finished telling the story, he said, "Only on that day in Janowska did I understand a verse in the Scriptures: 'They that are slain with the sword are better than they that are slain with hunger.'"²³

Based on a conversation of the Grand Rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, with Baruch Singer, January 3, 1975.

Even the Transgressors in Israel

"THIS PARTICULAR STORY IS ONE OF THOSE STORIES THAT DESERVES to be published in a book," said the Rabbi of Bluzhov to his Hasidim as he was telling about his experiences during the concentration-camp era.

In the Janowska Road Camp, there was a brigadier (a foreman of a brigade) from Lvov by the name of Schneeweiss, one of those people one stays away from if he values his life. He had known Rabbi Israel Spira in Lemberg (Lvov), but was not aware that the latter was an inmate at the Janowska Road Camp. Only a handful of Hasidim who were close to the rabbi knew the rabbi's identity and they kept it a secret.

The season of the Jewish holidays was approaching.¹ As the date of Yom Kippur was nearing, the fears in camp mounted. Everyone knew that the Germans especially liked to use Jewish holidays as days for inflicting terror and death. In Janowska, a handful of old-timers remembered large selections on Simhat Torah and Purim.

It was the eve of Yom Kippur. The tensions and the fears were at their height. A few Hasidim, among them Mendel Freifeld and others, came to the Rabbi of Bluzhov and asked him to approach Schneeweiss and request that on Yom Kippur his group not be as-

signed to any of the thirty-nine main categories of work, so that their transgression of the law by working on Yom Kippur would not be a major one.² The rabbi was very moved by the request of his Hasidim and despite his fears, for he would have to disclose his identity, went to Schneeweiss. He knew quite well that Schneeweiss did not have much respect for Jewish tradition. Even prior to the outbreak of World War II, he had publicly violated the Jewish holidays and transgressed against Jewish law. Here in Janowska, he was a cruel man who knew no mercy.

With a heavy heart, the rabbi went before Schneeweiss. "You probably remember me. I am the Rabbi of Pruchnik, Rabbi Israel Spira." Schneeweiss did not respond. "You are a Jew like myself," the rabbi continued. "Tonight is Kol Nidrei night. There is a small group of young Jews who do not want to transgress any of the thirty-nine main categories of work. It means everything to them. It is the essence of their existence. Can you do something about it? Can you help?"

The rabbi noticed that a hidden shiver went through Schneeweiss as he listened to the rabbi's strange request. The rabbi took Schneeweiss's hand and said, "I promise you, as long as you live, it will be a good life. I beg you to do it for us so that we may still find some dignity in our humiliating existence."

The stern face of Schneeweiss changed. For the first time since his arrival at Janowska, there was a human spark in it.

"Tonight I can't do a thing," said Schneeweiss, the first words he had uttered since the rabbi had come to him. "I have no jurisdiction over the night brigade. But tomorrow, on Yom Kippur, I will do for you whatever I can." The rabbi shook Schneeweiss's hand in gratitude and left.

That night they were taken to work near the Lvov cemetery. To this very day, the rabbi has scars from the beatings of that night. They returned to their barracks at one o'clock in the morning exhausted, beaten, with blood flowing from fresh wounds. The rabbi was trying to make his way to bed, one level of a five-tiered bunk bed made of a few wooden planks covered with straw. Vivid images from

the past, of Yom Kippur at home with his family and Hasidim, passed before his tear-filled eyes that wretched night at Janowska.

Suddenly the door opened and into the barracks came a young Hasid named Ben-Zion. "Rabbi, we must recite Kol Nidrei."

"Who can say Kol Nidrei now?" the rabbi replied. "The people can't even stand on their feet."

"Rabbi, I used to pray in your shtibl. Do you remember the tune?" In the darkness of the barracks, among tens of hungry, beaten, exhausted Jews, a melody was heard, the soothing, comforting melody of Yom Kippur, as Ben-Zion chanted a prayer:

And pardon shall be granted to the whole congregation of Israel and to the stranger who sojourneth among them. . . .

"Rabbi, the heart wants to hear a prayer. We must say Kol Nidrei. . . ." As Ben-Zion was talking to the rabbi, about twenty men gathered around them. How could he refuse? He took out his prayer shawl, which he kept well hidden underneath the straw on his bunk bed, and was about to begin to chant the Kol Nidrei.

No one knew how, but the news spread fast: In barracks number 12 they were chanting the Kol Nidrei. In the dark shadows of the Janowska barracks one could see dark shapes against the barracks walls as they made their way to barracks number 12.

They recited with the rabbi whatever they could recall from memory. When they reached the prayer "Hear our voice, O Lord our God; have pity and compassion . . ." the voices were drowned in tears.³

In the morning, the rabbi and a small group of young Hasidim were summoned to Schneeweiss's cottage. "I heard that you prayed last night. I don't believe in prayers," Schneeweiss told them. "On principle, I even oppose them. But I admire your courage. For you all know well that the penalty for prayer in Janowska is death." With that, he motioned them to follow him.

He took them to the S.S. quarters in the camp, to a large wooden house. "You fellows will shine the floor without any polish or wax.

And you, rabbi, will clean the windows with dry rags so that you will not transgress any of the thirty-nine major categories of work." He left the room abruptly without saying another word.

The rabbi was standing on a ladder with rags in his hand, cleaning the huge windows while chanting prayers, and his companions were on the floor polishing the wood and praying with him.

All of them are beloved, pure and mighty, and all of them in dread and awe do the will of their Master; and all of them open their mouths in holiness and purity, with song and psalm, while they glorify and ascribe sovereignty to the name of the Divine King.⁴

"The floor was wet with our tears. You can imagine the prayers of that Yom Kippur," said the rabbi to the Hasidim who were listening to his tale while he was wiping away a tear.

At about twelve o'clock noon, the door opened wide and into the room stormed two angels of death, S.S. men in their black uniforms, may their names be obliterated. They were followed by a food cart filled to capacity. "Noontime, time to eat bread, soup, and meat," announced one of the two S.S. men. The room was filled with an aroma of freshly cooked food, such food as they had not seen since the German occupation: white bread, steaming hot vegetable soup, and huge portions of meat.

The tall S.S. man commanded in a high-pitched voice, "You must eat immediately, otherwise you will be shot on the spot!" None of them moved. The rabbi remained on the ladder, the Hasidim on the floor. The German repeated the orders. The rabbi and the Hasidim remained glued to their places. The S.S. men called in Schneeweiss. "Schneeweiss, if the dirty dogs refuse to eat, I will kill you along with them." Schneeweiss pulled himself to attention, looked the German directly in the eyes, and said in a very quiet tone, "We Jews do not eat today. Today is Yom Kippur, our most holy day, the Day of Atonement."

"You don't understand, Jewish dog," roared the taller of the two.

"I command you in the name of the Führer and the Third Reich, *fress!*"⁵

Schneeweiss, composed, his head high, repeated the same answer. "We Jews obey the law of our tradition. Today is Yom Kippur, a day of fasting."

The German took out his revolver from its holster and pointed it at Schneeweiss's temple. Schneeweiss remained calm. He stood still, at attention, his head high. A shot pierced the room. Schneeweiss fell. On the freshly polished floor, a puddle of blood was growing bigger and bigger.

The rabbi and the Hasidim stood as if frozen in their places. They could not believe what their eyes had just witnessed. Schneeweiss, the man who in the past had publicly transgressed against the Jewish tradition, had sanctified God's name publicly and died a martyr's death for the sake of Jewish honor.

"Only then, on that Yom Kippur day in Janowska," said the rabbi to his Hasidim, "did I understand the meaning of the statement in the Talmud: 'Even the transgressors in Israel are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate is filled with seeds.'"⁶

Based on a conversation of the Grand Rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, with Baruch Singer, January 3, 1975. I heard it at the rabbi's house.

The Last Request

AS THE GERMAN EINSATZGRUPPEN WERE ABOUT TO EXECUTE THE Jewish population in a small Ukrainian town, a Hasidic Jew walked over to the young German officer in charge and told him that it was customary in civilized countries to grant a last request to those condemned to death. The young German assured the Jew that he would

Good Morning, Herr Müller

NEAR THE CITY OF DANZIG LIVED A WELL-TO-DO HASIDIC RABBI, scion of prominent Hasidic dynasties. Dressed in a tailored black suit, wearing a top hat, and carrying a silver walking cane, the rabbi would take his daily morning stroll, accompanied by his tall, handsome son-in-law. During his morning walk it was the rabbi's custom to greet every man, woman, and child whom he met on his way with a warm smile and a cordial "Good morning." Over the years the rabbi became acquainted with many of his fellow townspeople this way and would always greet them by their proper title and name.

Near the outskirts of town, in the fields, he would exchange greetings with Herr Müller, a Polish *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic German). "Good morning, Herr Müller!" the rabbi would hasten to greet the man who worked in the fields. "Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!" would come the response with a good-natured smile.

Then the war began. The rabbi's strolls stopped abruptly. Herr Müller donned an S.S. uniform and disappeared from the fields.¹ The fate of the rabbi was like that of much of the rest of Polish Jewry. He lost his family in the death camp of Treblinka and, after great suffering, was deported to Auschwitz.

One day, during a selection at Auschwitz, the rabbi stood on line with hundreds of other Jews awaiting the moment when their fates would be decided, for life or death. Dressed in a striped camp uniform, head and beard shaven and eyes feverish from starvation and disease, the rabbi looked like a walking skeleton. "Right! Left, left, left!" The voice in the distance drew nearer. Suddenly the rabbi had a great urge to see the face of the man with the snow-white gloves, small baton, and steely voice who played God and decided who should live and who should die. He lifted his eyes and heard his own voice speaking:

"Good morning, Herr Müller!"

"Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!" responded a human voice beneath the S.S. cap adorned with skull and bones. "What are you doing here?" A faint smile appeared on the rabbi's lips. The baton moved to the right—to life. The following day, the rabbi was transferred to a safer camp.

The rabbi, now in his eighties, told me in his gentle voice, "This is the power of a good-morning greeting. A man must always greet his fellow man."

Based on my conversation with an elderly Hasidic personality.

Two Capsules of Cyanide (I)

AMONG THE MANY DEVILISH TORMENTS DEVISED BY THE S.S. MEN at the Janowska Road Camp was a ceremony at dusk at the camp's gate. The S.S. men formed two lines at the entrance to "welcome" the inmates upon their return from a day's slave labor. The pageantry at hell's gate began to unfold when the first working detachment reached the gate, pageantry which might aptly have been called Conquerors and Vanquished at Twilight. The Germans would shout gleefully: "Who is the most respected race on the face of the earth?" The inmates, exhausted from their labor, would respond hoarsely: "The Third Reich!"

"And who is the most accursed race on earth?" the S.S. men would continue the diabolic dialogue. Prisoner's caps would fly in the air and above them once more the Jewish voices would rise in unison: "The Jewish people!"

"Louder!" the German command would roar and the Jews would respond again and again: "The Jews are the most accursed race on the face of the earth." This they would repeat while filing through