

# PESACH SHENI, 1945

*by I. I. Cohen*

On Wednesday, April 25, 1945, the SS guards in Kaufering's watchtowers suddenly disappeared.

The block supervisors in our camp - a satellite of Dachau - stopped beating and cursing; they knew that the explosives that had grown louder each day signaled the death throes of the Third Reich. Those of us whose legs could still carry them broke into the camp kitchen and hauled away potatoes, flour, cabbage and pieces of bread. A day earlier we would have been shot on sight for lesser sins, but now, several days since we had been given any food, our hunger overpowered our fright. We stuffed both our bellies and our pockets.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the familiar murderous voices of our German captors.

"Everyone in a row! Roll call!" In a flash, the thugs were once again running about with clubs and revolvers in hand, mercilessly chasing and dragging everyone out of the barracks. Having already experienced several years together in the ghetto, our small group of young Gerer Chasidim from Lodz tried to stick together. We discussed the situation. It was quite clear that the Allied forces were close by. Rumor had it that the SS command had ordered camp commanders to exterminate all inmates, so that no living testimony would be available to the Allied armies. We found it hard to believe in such a diabolical scheme, but six years under Nazi rule had taught us that bleak prophecies had a tendency to materialize.

We debated our alternatives. Should we follow orders and evacuate the camp, or risk trying to stay behind and await the Allies? We decided to stay and, one by one, stole into the dysentery block, where only the hopelessly ill lay. We hoped that the guards would choose not to enter the contaminated area.

But our hopes were dashed soon enough when our block door crashed open and an SS officer, his machine gun crackling, shouted "Everyone out! The camp is to be blown up!" Silence. We didn't stir, the Nazi left and night fell.

Suddenly the air shook with the wailing of sirens. The Allies were bombing the German defenses! We prayed that the thunderous explosions would go on forever, and eventually fell asleep to the beautiful sound of the bombs.

The next morning we awoke to an ominous silence, broken only by the moans of the dying. We arose cautiously and went outside the block. There was desolation everywhere, and a gaping hole in the barbed wire. Had it been torn open by the fleeing Germans? Were we free?

We went to the other barracks, and shared our discover with their frightened inhabitants - mostly "musselmen", or emaciated "skeletons". Soon enough we heard the unmistakable rumble of an approaching convoy. We sat and waited, our fear leavened with excitement.

The fear proved more prescient, and soon enough melted into acute disappointment, when the all too familiar SS uniforms came once again into view. The Nazis had returned, bringing an entire detachment of prisoners from other camps with them to help them finish their work. Amid the fiendish din of screams and obscenities, we hurriedly hid in one of the blocks, covered ourselves with straw and rags and lay still, our hearts pounding with terror. Soon we heard footsteps in the block and I felt a hand on my head. We had been discovered, by non-Jewish inmates of other labor and POW camps.

We pleaded with them to ignore us, and offered them our potatoes but just as the invaders had agreed, an SS officer came stomping in, swinging his club, which he then efficiently and heartlessly used on our heads. A boot on the behind, and we were on our way to the trucks, accompanied by the commandos and the SS.

We were picked up by our arms and legs and thrown onto a wagon piled with barely human-looking bodies; the moaning of the sick was replaced by the silence of the dead. By a stroke of luck, though, while the guards were busy with another wagon, my friend Yossel Carmel and I managed to roll out of the truck and found refuge in a nearby latrine. Though our hearts had long since turned to stone, our stomachs were convulsing.

Eventually the wagons left, and we crept back into the very block we had occupied earlier. I tore down the light hanging from the ceiling, and we posed, not unconvincingly, as corpses. Every so often the door would open, and we would hear a shout of "Everyone out!" but we just lay perfectly still. Darkness fell, motors rumbled, and then there was quiet.

Friday, April 27, 1945, brought a cold morning. White clouds chased each other across the bright blue sky as a frigid wind blew through the barracks, chilling our bones. Periodically, the earth trembled with an explosion; we sat quietly, each engrossed in his own thoughts. Suddenly, we heard motorcycles rumbling and dogs barking. Our hearts fell. Once again, the Germans were back.

We soon heard footsteps in the block, and then a frenzied voice, "Swine! You are waiting for the Americans? Come with me!" There followed a commotion, the sound of running, the shattering of glass, and then, a burst of machine gun fire. I peeked and saw that those who had been hiding near the window had tried to escape. Yossel and I had not been detected but were paralyzed with fright. Footsteps approached and then we heard the rustling of straw. When we felt tapping on the piles in which we were hiding, our terrified souls almost departed us.

We held our breath in fear as the footsteps moved away. Peeking through a hole in the straw that covered me, I felt smoke burning my eyes. Frantically, we ripped off the straw and rags and saw flames all around us. Hand in hand, Yossel and I fumbled toward the door, suffocating from the smoke, our heads spinning. In a moment that seemed an eternity, we found ourselves outside. Just a few yards from us stood the German murderers, fortunately, with their backs to us.

The entire camp was ablaze. We threw ourselves on the first pile of corpses that we saw and lay still; we no doubt resembled our camouflage. Around us we heard heavy footsteps, screams and the moaning of the fatally wounded. And what we saw was blood, fire, and clouds of smoke - hell on earth, complete with demons.

When silence finally fell again, I mumbled to Yossel that we ought to say vidui, the confession of sins a Jew makes periodically but especially when facing death. He chided me to remember what I had told him when we arrived in Auschwitz, our first concentration camp. The Sages of the Talmud, he reminded me, had admonished that "Even if the sword is braced on your neck, never despair of Divine mercy." Yossel recalled, too, the Sages' admonition that in times of danger Jews should renew their commitment to their faith.

We crawled to a nearby pit, shivering with cold. Through my smoke-filled eyes and fear-ridden senses, I thought I saw SS guards everywhere, with weapons poised. Yossel, however, finally managed to convince me that there was no one in sight; for an hour or more we lay in that pit. Every few minutes bombs whistled overhead, followed by fearsome explosions nearby. The earth shook,

but each blast pumped new hope into our hearts. Slowly, we crept out of the pit and made our way to the only building still standing - the camp kitchen. There we found a few more frightened souls.

Together we discovered a sack of flour, mixed it with water, started the ovens and baked flat breads. I noted the irony; it was Pesach Sheini - the biblical "Second Passover" a month after the first - and we were baking matzohs.

Suddenly, the door flew open and a Jewish inmate came running in breathlessly, crying out: "Yidden! Fellow Jews! The Americans are here!" We were free!

We wanted to cry, sing, dance, but our petrified hearts would not let us. I wanted to rush outside, but my strength seemed to have left me.

When I finally did manage to move outside, I saw a long convoy of tanks and jeeps roaring through the camp. A handful of American soldiers approached the barracks. One of them, an officer, looked around him, tears streaming down his face. Only then did I fully grasp the extent of the horror around us. The barracks were nearly completely incinerated. In front of each block lay a pile of blackened, smoldering skeletons.

And we, the living, were a group of ghouls, walking corpses. Along with the American soldiers, we wept.

Among the supplies the Americans had brought with them was a bottle of wine. An inmate picked it up and announced: "For years I have not recited the Kiddush. Today, I feel that I must." He then recited the words of the blessing on wine aloud.

And then he recited the "Shehecheyanu", the blessing of gratitude to G-d for having "kept us alive until this time."

---

### *AM ECHAD RESOURCES*

I.I. Cohen, a Polish-born survivor of three concentration camps living in Toronto, has just completed a

book about his wartime experiences, from which the above is excerpted. His memoir is soon to be published by ArtScroll/Mesorah.