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Box 1, Folder 28, "How the Jews Prayed on Rosh Hashanah in the Death Camps of Auschwitz", 6 September 1964.

HOW THE JEWS PRAYED ON ROSH HASHANAH  
IN THE DEATH CAMPS OF AUSCHWITZ

From an article written in Yiddish by Menashe Ungar in the Jewish Day-Morning Journal, September 6, 1964, translated by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum. This article will be included in a book entitled, "Sefer Hakedoshim," ["Book of the Martyrs"] to be published shortly in Yiddish.

In the death camps, Jews were aware of the dates of the Jewish calendar and sought in various ways to observe the Jewish holidays.

There were Jews gifted with good memories who remembered on what day a Jewish holiday fell. Furthermore, the newly-arrived "fresh" Jews who were regularly sent by "transport" from the various ghettos and work-camps to be gassed in Auschwitz, still remembered the Jewish calendar and gave over the dates to the Jews who were the older inhabitants of Auschwitz awaiting their end.

At the time of the Yomim Noraim (Days of Awe) practically all the Jews in Auschwitz knew when it was Rosh Hashanah and when Yom Kippur and everyone sought in his own way to observe the Holy Days.

The Hungarian Jews, whose expulsions took place at the very end of the war, did not begin to become settled in Auschwitz because the majority of them were hastily moved from the transport-wagons to the shower-installations - which were the disguised gas chambers - to be given a "shower". They entered with a counterfeit piece of soap, which was a stone, with a towel on the hand, and they were brought out through a second door as gassed corpses, passed on directly to the ovens where they were burned.

There were, however, exceptional cases: there were Jews who arrived from various countries, and who, for a variety of reasons

known secretly only to the Nazi murderers, were allowed to remain alive in Auschwitz for several days, and a part of them for weeks and even months.

A fearful episode that occurred on Rosh Hashanah involved a group of children were were brought to Auschwitz from Sigat, Hungary, and from other Hungarian provinces. [The account is reported in the Journal, "Bais Ya-akov"].

In the separate blocs, hundreds of children were huddled together and awaited their fate - "Mi l'chayim u'mi l'maves" - "who will live and who will die..." On the morning of Rosh Hashanah 1944, the arch-murderer Dr. Mengele has a "cross" erected in the "appeal" square in the camp. The post of the cross was buried deeply in the ground, but the cross-beam was not high above the ground.

The SS-men issued an order requiring all the children in the blocs to assemble in the square. The children lined up in rows and every child had to pass under the cross. The child whose head reached the cross-beam was placed on the right, and the child who was smaller and whose head did not reach the cross-beam was placed on the left.

The children and the Jews knew what this meant. The Kapos (the Jewish guards) had already let it become known to the unfortunate parents that Mengele had ordered that the children who were not tall enough and whose heads did not reach the cross-beam were not to be permitted to live; they were not able to work and "Auschwitz is not a sanatorium or a nursery for raising children..."



And so the children who were short in height stood on their tip-toes in the hope that they could make their heads reach the cross-beam. But SS-men stood around with whips in their hands and slashed at the children's feet until bloody, in order to compel the children to stand straight and not to deceive. The child, poor thing, who was shorter was placed on the left side and he knew that his fate was sealed.

And that is how 500 children were selected and isolated in a separate bloc, and on Rosh Hashanah in the morning they were to be gassed. The guards of the bloc were Kapos, the outcasts, who sold Jewish "birds" for a price. It became known to certain fathers that they could ransom their children for a piece of gold; they dug up their pieces of gold which they had hidden away, and they hastened to the Kapos to redeem their children.

The Kapo took the piece of gold and handed over to the forlorn father his child. But the Kapo knew, nevertheless, that in the morning he would have to turn over to the Obersturmfuehrer 500 children, and so he went into the other children's blocs and snatched a child who yesterday was designated to remain alive, and dragged him into the bloc of the children who marked to be gassed.

A Rabbi writes in the journal "Basi Ya'akov" that on Rosh Hashanah in the morning a Jew came to him and with bitter tears told how that he came to ask a "She'alah" (a question of religious law requiring a Rabbinic opinion):

His child is to be found among the 500 children who are to be gassed, and this is his one and only son. He had hidden a golden coin in the seam of his garment during the time that he was being transported to Auschwitz and the Nazis had not found it. Now with this coin he could deliver his only son, but he knew that no sooner that the Kape hands over to him his child, he will snatch another Jewish child. He wants to know whether he is permitted to do this, to destroy another child in the place of his child...

The Rabbi writes that he himself cried torrents of tears. Together with the Jew he bemoaned the fate which brought them to such a trial, compelling him to deliver an opinion on such a question. The Rabbi beseeched the Jew that he should behave as his own conscience dictates. But the Jew persisted: here he has the golden coin, here he can redeem his only child, but he wants to know whether according to the law (al pi din) he is permitted to do it...

Both cried bitterly and the Rabbi decided that according to the law one is not allowed to do it. It is written in the Gemorrah (the Talmud) that when two men are traveling in the desert and they have one flask with a small amount of water - if both drink, both will perish from thirst; if only one will drink, he will survive and the other will die. What should be done? The Halakhah is that both should drink and both should perish, for "how do you know that your blood is redder than the blood of another person?" That means - how do you know that your life is more precious than the life of another?"

And the Rabbi decided that the Jew is not permitted to ransom his one and only son because he knows that the cruel one, the Kapo, will snatch a second Jewish child who had been designated to live and will cause his death instead of that of his own child.

Shortly thereafter when the Jews came together in a corner of the bunker to recite in whispers the Rosh Hashanah prayers and when they uttered the words, "Hayom havas olam, hayom Ya'amid ba'mishpat kol yetsei olamim, im K'Vonim, im K'avodim, im K'Vonim rachamenu K'rachem av al bonim ["Today the world was brought into being, today ~~and~~ the creatures of the world stand under judgment, either as sons or as slaves; if as sons have compassion on us as a father has compassion on his sons..."] - at that moment the 500 children were led by into the gas chambers, and the Jew who was able to rescue his only child collapsed in a faint.

[As revealed during the Frankfurt proceedings of the Nazi trials by the witness Joseph Glick (?), on that day of Rosh Hashanah 1944 the Nazis had gassed 1,200 Jewish Children].

In his book "And the World Was Silent" (published by the Central Federation of Polish Jews in Argentina, Buenos Aires, 1956), the writer Elie Wiesel describes how the Jews prayed on Rosh Hashanah in Auschwitz.