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**Churban Europe,
and the Spiritual Survival of the Jews**

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the Memories Now*

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Churban Europe, and the Spiritual Survival of the Jews

We Must Record the Memories Now



Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac Herzog ז"ר (center)-first chief Rabbi of Israel, visiting the displaced persons camp in Zalsheim-Frankfurt in 1946. Rabbi Leib Geliebter, ז"ר, is second from right.

A LETTER FOR THE GENERATIONS

My father, ז"ר, never showed it to us when he was alive. It was while I was looking through his papers about ten years ago that I found it, a letter he had written to his sister's brother-in-law and hidden in 1943, in a work camp within the Chenstechov Ghetto, and retrieved after the war.

The letter describes in detail the travail and torture that befell his family in particular and the Jewish people as a whole. One paragraph about the loss of his two-year-old nephew Yitzchak'l is especially poignant for me:

"Every moment is a frightening experience. I write with great fear, because we are not allowed to stay in our rooms.... He could have grown up

to be a *Gadol* in *Klal Yisroel*. He was wise beyond his years. He spoke like a grown-up, with an extraordinary command of language. He was beautiful like the sun in the sky. He was a gifted child, an *illui*. He already knew the *Aleph Beis*. He had a very pleasant personality, like his mother. Whoever looked at this child could not take his eyes off him and bought him a gift. Such a talented child, lost. I regret all the losses, but especially of this child, who was dear to me as my own. From such a child, we would have gained great benefit. He was one in a thousand. This was the dear child of your brother Hirsch and my sister Rochel.

"I am writing all this with tears, not ink. How could one forget such a great *neshama*? All our dear ones were torn away by the roots, in the bloom of their lives. Our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers—taken away from us....

"Remember us and say *Kaddish*; see to it that *Mishnayos* are learned.... The dear souls should not be forgotten...."

Though I, as all of us, have read and studied much about the Holocaust, I had never understood in a deeper sense the anguish that my own father had experienced—until

reading of it in a letter in his own hand. Having read and re-read the eulogy of one child by someone close to both him and me, I can begin to recognize the pain of the loss to all of Jewry of one and one half million children.

But there was another document I found among my father's papers that I had not known about. It was a blueprint for a *mikva* near the Displaced Persons Camp in Zalsheim, Frankfurt, where he served as a *Rav* after the war.

I knew that at the Holocaust's end, my father's first instinct—as that of others—was to rebuild Jewish life. I knew that he saw to the production of *tefillin*, *taleisim*, and other *tashmishei kedusha*, and that he had written a history of the *Gedolei Torah* and Agudath Israel of his own city, Plotzk, out of the simple realization that there was almost no one else left to record the stories.

But I had scarcely appreciated what it had meant for him and others of the *She'aris Hapleita* (survivors) to go on with their lives while containing all their pain and rebuild the mag-

Dr. Joseph Geliebter, a *musmach* of Mesivta Torah Vodaath, is a clinical psychologist. He served on the Oral History Committee of the Agudath Israel's Commission on Holocaust Remembrances, and is founder of the Rabbi Leib Geliebter Memorial Foundation.

nificent structures of Torah life we enjoy today. Holding this blueprint in my hands somehow made it all much more tangible.

The realization drove home to me the importance of interviewing those of the *She'aris Hapleita* and recording their memories on videotape for their own families and for posterity. It was around the same time that I was privileged to be appointed to the Oral History Committee of the Agudath Israel Commission on Holocaust Remembrances, which produced—based on interviews it conducted with a representative group of survivors—the landmark video presentation, "Faith Amid the Flames: The Untold Story of Spiritual Heroism in the Holocaust."

It was an important start, but much, much more is left to be done. And the time is now. As our sage Hillel says: "Ve'im lo achshav, eimasat?" If not now, when?

It is for this reason that, working closely with Agudath Israel and others, I founded the Rabbi Leib Geliebter Memorial Foundation, in my father's memory.

TIME TO CONFRONT THE LOSS

My father himself, ל"ה, passed away twenty-one years ago, his papers still waiting to be taken out and shown to his children. Until that point, he had not yet been able to fully disclose to them what—I am sure he realized—eventually had to be told. The wounds were yet too raw for him, as they were for so many who survived.

Had these survivors fully con-

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fronted and dwelt upon their losses in those first decades, they likely would have been unable to go on with life. They needed to keep busy, to work hard. They needed to re-establish everything—their families, their *kehillos*, their livelihoods—to restore for themselves a sense of stability and ensure a brighter future for their children.

Today, fifty years after the *Churban*, the wounds are still raw. Particularly from the perspective of *Klal Yisroel's* history, half a century is a relatively short span of time. We are still close to the Holocaust, and I believe that we have barely passed through the early stages of mourning: shock, emotional numbness, and a fear of losing control over one's emotions. But it is time, finally, to confront the loss if we are indeed to transmit the legacy of our parents to future generations.

It goes without saying that we must focus not just on the horror, but on the heroism—that of those who survived and that of those who did not. Children and teenagers need heroes, and may not be able to deal with

the pain. We need to speak of strength, not weakness; of pride, not indignity.

It is in this regard—as has been emphasized for years by Agudath Israel, and most recently, at this year's annual national convention—that we who are Torah observant have a special obligation. While others may emphasize physical resistance that took place during the Holocaust, our task is to highlight the spiritual resistance that was so common, the *Kiddush Hashem* that was manifest every day. (See sidebar on page 10.)

Moreover, we must retrieve a picture of the richness of Jewish life before the war. And we must reflect on the rebuilding of Jewish life in its aftermath. We must make our children feel the pride that after everything our survivors went through—after passing through a modern-day *kiushan ha'eish*—they did not lose their faith; that after all they endured, they sent their own children to *yeshivos* and set the example of Jewish living according to the *mesora* for yet another generation.

THE MISSION OF THE CHILDREN OF SURVIVORS

Children of survivors—deeply aware of the *Churban* but not having been traumatized personally by it—have a special responsibility of passing on this legacy. They need to encourage their parents to talk about what happened. It begins, of course, in the family; from father to son, from mother to daughter, *veshinantam levanecha*—and you shall teach them to your children.

It begins within the family, but it becomes more. It becomes the heritage of all *Klal Yisroel*.

Since we¹ began videotaping last year, more than 70 oral interviews with survivors have already been completed. Each has shared trenchant memories of Jewish religious and spiritual life in pre-war Europe and during the years of the *Churban* itself, as well as reminiscences of the rebuilding in the war's aftermath.

The interviews are professionally

¹ Referring to the Rabbi Leib Geliebter Memorial Foundation.

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recorded on the highest quality equipment, at the survivor's home or at another convenient location. A copy of the interview tape is provided to the family at no charge; other copies are archived for future study by scholars and students, and are also available to *yeshivos* for use in various educational projects.

At the Pesach seder, we read in the *Haggada*: "In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he personally left Egypt." We do not have photographs from Egypt, but the images of that experience have been successfully etched into our collective memory through the retelling of the stories from parent to child through thousands of years. In the case of the Holocaust, the memories are still alive with those who were there and those who participated in the rebuilding in its wake. Now is the time to capture them before they are lost forever. ■

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From the Interviews

■ The Germans and their collaborators were well aware of the Jewish holidays, Reb Pinchas remembers, and would cruelly time many of their *aktions* accordingly. In 1944, a work-detail was transferred from Auschwitz to a neighboring work camp to begin labor on the first day of *Rosh Hashana*. People took turns reciting parts of the *Rosh Hashana davening* from memory.

Reb Pinchas had hidden himself for part of the day to avoid the work because he had no strength left. On his way back to rejoin the detail, he passed a kitchen where Jewish women were working. One ran out to give him some cooked food, encouraging him to eat it and restore his soul. She did the same for others who were passing, although had she been caught, she could easily have paid with her life. The survivor had not eaten food of this quality in five years. He hid, spending half an hour savoring the delicacy. It seemed that the woman had wanted to provide fellow Jews with a special food in honor of Rosh Hashana, and Reb Pinchas says her self-sacrifice contributed greatly to his survival.

■ In August of 1944, remembers a survivor from the Lodz Ghetto, indus-

trial equipment from a factory was being packed for shipment to Theresienstadt, where the workers were being transferred. Risking their lives, they hid a small *Sefer Torah* together with the equipment, considering it as essential to their survival as their bodies.

■ In Russia, after all he survived during the war, Reb Yoseif and his group were drafted into the service of the Red Army, where religious practice was punishable severely, if not by death. For Rosh Hashana, he and his companions—who had no other writing materials—took bottles and plastered them with soap. With a stick, he etched the entire *Mussaf* from memory—complete with *Malchiyos*, *Zichronos* and *Shofros*—and from this "*Machzor*" the *shliach tzibbur* was able to lead all in a clandestine *Yamim Noraim davening*.

■ The young girl, remembers a survivor of Auschwitz, was taken out to be hanged for an act of resistance. The entire camp was required to stand and watch. As she was brought to the gallows, her defiant scream pierced the air: "*Shma Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad!*" And they all listened in proud silence.



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