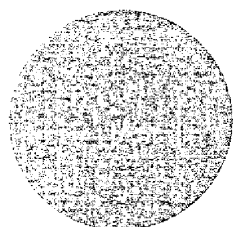


JUDAISM AND THE HOLOCAUST
THROUGH THE EYES OF A

SURVIVOR

Isaac C. Avigdor



THE TRICKS AND GIMMICKS IN THE GERMAN PLAN FOR THE TOTAL LIQUIDATION OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE. THE NAIVETE AND THE DISBELIEF OF THE PEOPLE IN GHETTO. THE FIRST REPORTS ABOUT CREMATORIA AND BELZEC CONCENTRATION CAMP. HAMAN FORGED THE DECREE OF THE KING.

Hitler's Bluff

Following Haman's Footsteps

It was the period of Purim, 1943 in the Drohobycz ghetto. The only synagogue into which people could still sneak in unnoticed for a prayer service, was the "Yishray Lev" Synagogue (built by the well-known scholar and philanthropist, Zelig Lauterbach). From the outside there was no telling that this was a Beit Midrash, as the building was tucked away in a forsaken side street and the entrance to the synagogue was through a courtyard.

Our family of 12 lived in the women's gallery after the Germans had confiscated our apartment in Sobieska Street. We slept on the hard synagogue benches, and despite all the discomforts we were quite satisfied. As soon as we moved into the synagogue we started making a bunker. Through a concealed hole in the wall we were able to place a ladder which we used to go down into a deep cellar and from there, through a second opening, crawl through the town's sewage canal and get out into the street. My Father, may he rest in peace, hid in this bunker.

As the official town rabbi and a major in the Polish Army,

One of the Holy Cast

Father was Number 1 on the SS liquidation list. As soon as we learned about this we decided that Father had to disappear from public view. He cut off his majestic beard and sidecurls and went down to the cellar, emerging from there only just before the liquidation of the ghetto. Down in his hideaway he had books and continued to study and write. As is usual in a cellar, it was damp down there, but it was also warm. For illumination Father had a kerosene lamp.

Only a few intimate friends knew that the Rabbi was in town and how he could be reached. The Jews were in a deep depression at that time over the May "action" in which the Germans took 4,000 people away in freight trucks, loaded them into railway cattle cars and sent them off to an unknown destination.

The Germans said that they were taking people to work at the front. The Jews believed this, because it never occurred to anyone that right in the middle of a war, with nearly the whole world, the Germans would take a train with dozens of cars to transport thousands of people to some remote place in order to kill them.

Many people were so naive that they voluntarily reported to the assembly points and even followed the Germans' instructions to take along as much baggage as they could carry. Some went to say goodbye to near and dear ones who were hiding. People talked themselves into saying that if one had to go to work, then "We'll go to work. It's no picnic in the ghetto."

After that black day of the "action" we waited on tenterhooks for some news about the deported people, but the entire transport had vanished like a stone dropped in the middle of a lake. Weeks passed without a word. Some Gentiles told the Jews, with whom they worked outside the ghetto, horror stories to the effect that all the Jews had been murdered.

But nobody took these stories seriously. "It's impossible to mass-murder thousands of people. If they *did* want to massacre

Hitler's Bluff

them, why should they send them far away? Why wouldn't the Germans kill them off outside the city, the way they handled smaller groups in previous "actions"? These stories are concoctions of the Goyim, anti-Semitic provocations that Goyim cook "up to torment the Jews."

That night a Jewish young man, Mundek Badian, came stealthily into the "Yishray Lev" synagogue. He was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow who very early had gone to work for the SS. Coming from a family of horse dealers, he became the supplier for the stables of the riding school the Germans had set up for their sports activities and for military purposes.

Because of his contacts, Badian had permission to travel through the countryside among the Gentiles for the purpose of supplying the Germans' needs. Badian dressed elegantly, wearing tall, polished boots such as other ghetto Jews did not possess, or at least certainly did not wear. He rarely came into the ghetto and when the terrible "actions" took place he was on the Aryan side, under the protection of the SS, where he supervised the breeding and grooming of horses and bulls in German stables and barns.

Badian asked me to step aside with him and he told me the horrible news that the Germans had taken the entire transport of Drohobycz Jews, together with other Jews from the surrounding towns, to Belzec, where they had been gassed to death. He had overheard two SS officers talking about it, laughing uproariously as they did so, in his presence. Belzec was not a labor camp, but a death camp. "Mundek," I asked him, shocked, "Belz, the famous city of the Belzer Rebbe, has become a camp with gas chambers!?" "No," he replied, "Not Belz, but Belzec. That's another place. The Germans built a big camp there with crematoria to burn thousands of people down to ashes. There is no chance that any of them are still alive. Tell your father and let him do what he thinks necessary."

My grandmother, the Terever Rebbetzin, may G-d avenge her blood, my Father's mother, had been on that train. The Germans had grabbed her on the street, the way dog catchers

One of the Holy Cast

nab roaming dogs, and we didn't find out about it until a few days later.

"How can I tell my Father such news Badian?" I asked. "Come down to the bunker with me and tell him personally everything you told me." Badian did me a favor and repeated to my Father what he had reported to me.

My Father was all incongruous. He said: "Is it possible that the Germans burned thousands of people to ashes? But the Germans said they were sending those unfortunate people to work at the front! In other words, they told a cock-and-bull story in order to lull everybody and avoid resistance. The whole ghetto must be told about Badian's report and everybody must try to save themselves – run away and find a hideaway somewhere. All of us must do everything possible to stay alive. The greatest Kiddush Hashem, the greatest act of glorification of G-d's Name, will be outliving Hitler."

The news spread quickly, and a pall of gloom settled on the ghetto; the Jews of Drohobycz were frantic.

About two weeks later, at Purim time, when I came back from work, I saw that my Father looked encouraged, practically cheerful. "What's happening?" I asked. "Is there some good news?" "No, but I've found it," my Father exclaimed with great satisfaction.

"What is this great thing you've found?" I asked.

"You should know," my Father replied, "that the Germans are doing exactly what Haman planned a long time ago. I never understood that passage in the Scroll of Esther about how Haman bought the Jews from Achasuerus for 10,000 pieces of silver. Persia was a democracy then. The constitution guaranteed civil liberties and permitted the different nationalities to speak their respective languages. Suddenly that same king promulgated a law permitting the slaughter of an entire nation. True, Achasuerus was a fool, but it is incomprehensible how such a turnabout could occur in such a short time. And

Hitler's Bluff

how could this same king, after Esther exposed Haman's nefarious scheme, play dumb and ask, 'Who is the man who planned this murderous plot?' In other words, Ahasuerus supposedly remembered nothing, knew nothing!"

"It is even more difficult," Father continued excitedly, "to understand Esther's statement, 'If we had been sold for slaves and maidservants, I would have remained silent.' Does that mean that Esther would not have minded if Jews had been incarcerated in labor camps? She would have accepted that?! That is unbelievable!"

"It must be that Haman had devised a scheme for bluffing King Ahasuerus into getting his agreement to annihilate the Jews. In the contract he wrote 'le-'ovdan,' with an 'ayin,' meaning 'to enslave them.' After the king signed the agreement, Haman changed the 'ayin' to an 'alef,' so that 'to enslave them' became 'to annihilate them.' The decree was quickly published throughout the land without anyone's noticing the forgery.

"Once Mordechai caught onto Haman's swindle he informed Esther. That is why Esther tearfully pleaded with Ahasuerus saying that she would have remained silent if only enslavement had been involved. When Ahasuerus realized that an illegally altered document was involved here, he furiously shouted, 'Who is the man who dared to do such a thing behind my back?' The rest of the story is well known."

"It seems," my Father continued, "that Hitler's SS men are using Haman's method. They say 'work' while they mean 'slaughter,' in order to deceive their victims and all the rest of the world."

Hitler succeeded where Haman did not. Nearly all the 50,000 Jews of our town and region perished: the area today is Jewless. The lands of Drohobycz, which were bought by Don Isaac Abarbanel for settling the Jews expelled from Spain, are today inhabited by Ukrainian peasants. The town that was the residence of Reb Itzikel of Drohobycz, where the holy Baal

One of the Holy Cast

Shem Tov visited him, the chair in which he sat and the mikva in which he did his ritual immersions – all this has been eradicated. Gone is the famous Jewish cemetery to which hundreds of "Stolin" Chassidim used to come every year on a pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Chaim of Karlin, of blessed memory, or that of Rabbi Eleazar Nissan Teitelbaum. Gone are the dozens of shtieblech, synagogues, study houses, the rabbis, rabbinical judges, and Torah students and maskillim. The institutions are all gone today, erased from the map of Poland of yesteryear, as though they never existed. May G-d avenge the spilled blood of His servants and judge the nations that caused it to be spilled!