

Yom Hashoah

I have a story to tell you. It is only a fraction of the whole. To tell the whole story of the enormity of the Holocaust is not only impossible, but it is also unbearable. One out of every three Jews in the world was murdered only because they were Jews, like we are.

The late Telzer Rosh Yeshiva Rav Mordechai Katz a survivor of the Holocaust said that to look at the entire destruction at once would overwhelm us with horror and pain that would be unlivable. All we can do he said is look at its fragments.

And so today I would like to share with you a story which represents a small fragment of the whole. It is story of death and destruction, of brutality and inhumanity, of courage and faith, of rebirth and renewal. It is also a personal story, but one that many of you could also tell in one form or another. I would like to begin my story by telling you about my great-grandfather Reb Kalmen Meier Goldstein who left Vorne, Lithuania and after a long journey which took him through England arrived here in South Africa in 1896 at the tender age of 17. He left behind his mother, father, six siblings ? two of whom eventually joined him here ?, uncles and aunts, cousins and friends. His parents died before the war but he never knew what had become of the remaining family during the war. Soon after the war he received a letter from his niece Roza Olshvang who was still in Lithuania at the time. Her letter is written in Yiddish and was recently discovered in my great-grandfather?s papers. Translated it includes the following:

Tzu mayn lieben onkel Kalmen

To My Dear Uncle Kalmen

Your letter of 25/8 was received by me and I read it with much joy. Dear Uncle, to write everything out for you (about) all that we experienced at that time is impossible, nevertheless I will write a little about it.

As soon as the War started, the Germans occupied Vorne within three days. The terrifying times began for us immediately. The shtetl was burnt down and we were all taken away to Telshe to a concentration camp. There we suffered hunger and filth ? you cannot imagine how terrible the people there looked. Afterwards there began even more terrible days, they began to shoot people every day. My father, Uncle Avrom (Kalmen?s brother) and Aunt Pesia?s husband were shot dead on 15 July 1941. (All the men were shot earlier) and the women and children they left to suffer for a further short time in the camp.

On the 28 August 1941 they took us (the women and children) to be shot standing at the pit. At the time of the shooting, my aunt, my mother?s sister and I succeeded in running away. My Mother, Auntie Pesia and the children had already been shot dead. They used to order 10 to 20 people to undress and go to the pit and then threw grenades or shot with automatic rifles/machine guns (into the pits). Somehow we ran away. A frightening time then started for us?Many a time we regretted as to why we had run from the pits; better to have succumbed together with everyone rather than to suffer so much?Immediately the Russians freed Lithuania (July 1944) ? we came to live in Laukuva as my aunt was a Laukuver. We thought that perhaps we would find something there of my aunt?s possessions. We found nothing there and also no Jews either. We moved to Shavel to live there.

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?I am 16 years old now. Dear Uncle, I am very happy that we correspond with each other. You cannot imagine the level of joy I had the day I received your letter: it was a Yom Tov for me?

Dear Uncle, to visit you in Africa is not possible at the moment. Thank you for the money (you sent) but if you want to send something, rather send goods. I am ending my letter with the best regards to you my loving uncle.

Your niece, Roza

Most of Kalmen Meir?s family from Vorne were murdered by the Germans together with the Jews of Telz, which was a nearby

town. The women of both neighbouring towns were murdered in the Giruliai forest just outside Telz. The story of the destruction of Vorne and Telz is the story of the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry and indeed of all European Jewry, of the complete annihilation of great Jewish communities with long and proud histories.

Abba Eban described the extent of the carnage and destruction as follows and I quote:

Poland had become a Jewish graveyard. Before the war large Jewish communities had existed in some two thousand cities and villages in Poland alone. Almost 90% of the communities had been completely obliterated from the map. And those that remained were pale, weak, debilitated shadows of former glory. [The] former Jewish population [of Poland] had been 3,300,000 fewer than 74,000 remained in 1945. Of 356,000 in Czechoslovakia, only 14,000; of 156,000 in Holland, fewer than 20,000.

Jewry came out of the war orphaned. Six million of its people over a third of the pre-war total had perished. Utterly extinguished were the hundreds of Jewish communities which had represented the centers of national consciousness and creativity, its cultural and spiritual resources. East-European Jewry had been the people's heart, the source of its vitality. For centuries, the great majority of Jewry's spiritual leaders had either there or originated there. From Eastern Europe had come the giants of Biblical learning. In Eastern Europe were the great academies of Talmudic studies. Many of the originators of the Zionist movement, the halutzim, the writers and thinkers, had hailed from Eastern Europe.

End of quote.

And so the story of the destruction of Vorne and Telz is part of a much wider catastrophe that was the Holocaust. But their story is also about awe-inspiring courage and faith in G-d. Telz was the place of the famous Telz Yeshiva, founded by Rav Lazar Gordon, and continued under the leadership of Rav Yosef Leib Bloch who died in 1929. When the Germans came his son Rav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch was the Rabbi of the town of Telz and the Rosh Yeshiva of the great Telz Yeshiva. His daughter Rebbitzin Chaya Ausband now of Cleveland Ohio survived the war and wrote about the strength, courage and faith of her father in the face of the terrible brutality of the Germans and the Lithuanians who turned on their Jewish neighbours. She wrote and I quote:

On Friday afternoon June 27 1941 the Germans commanded all the Jews of Telz to gather in the city marketplace. Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch didn't pay any attention to the rifles pointed directly at him despite the Germans' repeated orders that every Jew stand still and not make a sound. Instead he turned towards the crowd of Jews and spoke words of encouragement and strength.

End of quote.

For the next two weeks the Germans humiliated and brutally attacked the Jews of Telz. The Telzer Rov Rav Avrohom Yitzchok was unbroken. On one occasion a German officer beat the Telzer Rov upon the head with hammer blows and taunted him: "Where is your G-d, Herr Rabbiner?" The Telzer Rov replied, "He is not only my G-d, He is your G-d: and the world will yet see this."

On the 14th of July 1941 the Jews of Telz were told that the men would be killed the next day. Rebbitzin Ausband relates how her father Rav Avrohom Yitzchok, the night before his certain death, called one of his daughters to read out aloud from the Rambam (Maimonides) the laws of Kidush Hashem sanctifying G-d's name through martyrdom. The next day Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch and his brother Rav Zalman Bloch were shot and killed together with the other men of Telz. A student who survived returned to tell the family that the Rav had been saying the Shema as he was shot. The next day the women were taken to the Geruliai forest and shot.

Under the worst possible conditions, Jews across Europe displayed the courage and faith of the Telzer Rabonim. Rabbi Efraim Oshry describes how German and Lithuanian thugs burst into the famous Kovno synagogue in Lithuania:

The Germans and Lithuanians were armed; the Jewish men were unarmed. The Jews stood there, proud, courageous, wrapped in their billowing talleisim [prayer shawls], crowned with their tefillin [phylacteries], looking straight into the murderers' faces. The Germans and Lithuanian Nazis seemed momentarily taken aback by the fearlessness of those men. But all too soon they attacked. Exactly how long the Jews were beaten and tortured, I do not know. But shortly after this senseless attack, the Jewish men were led through the streets of Kovno in anguish, blood staining their talleisim. Yet even in this condition, not a single one broke down.

They walked upright, wrapped in their talleisim, still wearing their tefillin G-d's soldiers.

They were led to the bank of the Viliya River, which runs through the center of town, where they were ordered to dig ditches. Still wearing their talleisim and tefillin reminding them of the echod [the "One"] they stood digging their own graves. They stood tall and brave, eyewitnesses later said, it seemed as if the Germans were the captives and the Jews were the victors.

Not one of those men had any illusions about what was in store for him. But even in the last minutes of their lives, they did not

break down. A crowd of Lithuanian anti-Semites gathered around them. Jeering, enjoying the spectacle, they tried to provoke the helpless Jewish men, but to no avail. The Jews remained firm and recited their prayers ? with greater intensity, with more passion, with more sanctity than ever before. They stood and said Viduy [final confession recitation before death] as they dug the soil for their own graves. At that moment they were no longer part of this world of falsehood ? they had transcended to a higher world, the world of truth. The Germans with their machine guns, the Lithuanians with their axes and iron rods, no longer existed for them. They [the Germans and Lithuanians] were part of the dirt in the corridor that is this world.

?As the Germans mowed them down, the tune of Lithuanian Jewry ? the heartfelt soulful Tehillim [Psalms] ? was heard. And so the music of the sweet singer of Israel accompanied the matyrs of the old Kovno synagogue as they fell into the graves they had been forced to dig for themselves.

Rabbi Oshry was a true Talmid Chochem ? a formidable Rabbinical scholar who survived the Holocaust. He spent most of that terrible time in the Kovno ghetto and many Jews turned to him for answers as to how they could fulfill the exact requirements of the .Halocha (Jewish law). He was asked, for example, of how to fulfill the Mitzva, the commandment, of the four cups of wine on Passover night at a Seder when people didn't have wine. He was asked about when to put on Tefillin if a person went out to forced labour before daybreak and returned after nightfall since tefillin is a Mitzva which has to be fulfilled in the daytime.

The questions people asked demonstrated how committed they were to ethical living based on the Torah. In one case the following question arose. The Nazis had forced the Jews of the Kovno ghetto to dig a pit to bury the dead and had made them remove the garments of the deceased before burying them. Rabbi Oshry was asked whether the survivors who had buried the dead could use their garments.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Meisels was asked the following terrifying question on the eve of Rosh Hashona 1944 in Aushwitz. 1400 teenage boys were imprisoned in a special cell block destined for death in the crematoria the next day. A father told the rabbi that he had the money necessary to bribe one of the guards to release his son. However, he knew that the guards would have to replace the freed boy with another child because the exact number of boys was known by the camp authorities. Could he save his own son if it meant another would die in his place? Can you imagine even asking such a question? Such honour,heroism composure and commitment to Torah!

During that same Rosh Hashona Rabbi Meisels went around Auschwitz in great secret sounding a shofar. The 1400 condemned boys heard that Rabbi Meisels had a shofar. They begged him to come into their cell and blow for them. He bribed the guards of the cell and risked being discovered and then killed with the boys the next day. He described what happened, and I quote:

The lads cried out bitterly, ?Rebbe, rebbe come, for G-d's sake; have pity on us; let us have the merit of this mitzvah in our last moments.? The entreaties of the boys did not allow me to rest ? I decided not to turn them away empty-handed ? After the sounding of the shofar, when I was about to leave the block, one boy stood up and cried out ??I say to you, we can hope that things will get better, but we must be prepared for them to get worse. For G-d's sake, let us not forget to cry out shema yisarel with devotion at the last moment.

Rabbi Oshry encountered similar devotion on 29 October 1941 when the Germans commanded all 30 000 Jews of the Kovno ghetto to assemble to be selected for death. Thousands were going to be sent to their death and no one knew whether they or their families would survive. One man asked the rabbi what the correct blessing to be recited was for the fulfillment of the mitzvah of sanctifying G-d's name through martyrdom. He wanted to as his last mitzvah on earth to teach this blessing to the throngs of Jews awaiting death. Rabbi Oshry told him that the ?Shlo HaKodosh?, a 16th century scholar held that the correct blessing is ?Blessed are You Hashem our G-d King of the universe Who has sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us to sanctify His name in the presence of the many?. The man returned later in the day to say that he had heard that Rabbi Naftoli Wasserman had been taught the same version of the blessing by his father Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman who was himself murdered in the early days of the German occupation, and who had been taught that same blessing by the Chofetz Chaim, who had taught it to his students during the Petlura pogroms in Russia after WW1.

Let me return to the story of Telz Yeshivah. Two brothers, Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch and Rav Zalman Bloch were murdered, but the third brother Rav Elyah Meir Bloch had escaped before the war to the United States of America. Before the Germans invaded Rav Elyah Meir and Rav Mordechai Katz had been sent by their colleagues and families to the United States in order to

secure visa's for the community of the Telz Yeshiva. They has realized that trouble was coming but no one of course realized the extent of the horror of the impending disaster. Rav Elyah Meir and Rav Mottel (as Rav Mordechai Katz was known) were smuggled out of Europe by heading East and eventually reached the United States via Siberia and Japan.

Soon after they arrived in America the news was conveyed to Rav Elyah Meir and Rav Mottel that the Germans had destroyed Telz and that their families and colleagues had been murdered. Rav Elyah learnt that he had lost his two brothers Rav Zalman and Rav Avrohom Yitzchok. He learnt of the murder of his wife and all his children save for one of his daughters who survived. Rav Mottel learned of the murder of his wife and his ten children. They had planned to bring their families and colleagues from Telz to the United States. But there was no one to bring, everyone was dead. And so Rav Elyah Meir and Rav Mottel found themselves bereft of their murdered family and murdered colleagues in a strange country, whose language they could not speak. The Telz Yeshiva was no more. There were almost no Jews left in Telz and there was almost nothing left of the Jewish Lithuania they had known.

Rav Elyah Meir and Rav Mottel resolved that a new Telz Yeshiva had to be established in America. They chose Cleveland Ohio as the location for the new Telz. With superhuman effort and dedication the Telz Yeshiva was begun in Cleveland in 1942 while Europe was still burning. How did they find the courage and bravery to start again after such devastation, to rebuild after such horrific loss?

Rav Mordechai Gifter, a student of Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch, joined them in building and developing the Telz Yeshiva in America and he wrote many years later recalling the strength of Rav Elyah Meir's conviction and determination to rebuild Telz. I quote from Rav Gifter's words:

There was a specific characteristic which permeated the work and efforts of the Rosh Yeshiva [Rav Elyah Meir]. Upon his arrival in this country [America] by way of Siberia and Japan, he met with a group of friends at the Broadway Central Hotel in New York. I recall the gist of what he then spoke ? The Rosh Yeshiva ZT?L was motivated by a deep sense of Divine mission, sent to America by a message couched in the persecution and destruction of European Jewry. It was this sense of mission which brought forth all his endless efforts in the building of Torah in this country ? It was this sense of mission which motivated him in all his indefatigable work for the Klal Yisroel [the Jewish people] ? This sense of mission grows from a realization that life has a purpose and a deep awareness of that purpose ? When one's life is permeated with this consciousness, then all is part of the plan of Divine Providence ? all situations and conditions in life represent the various forms in which one must perform the mission for which he has been sent into Olom Hazeh [this world]. This was the nature of the Rosh Yeshiva's life.

Rav Elyah Meir's partner in rebuilding Telz, Rav Mordechai Katz, would often tell his new American students of what kept him going. He said to them on many occasions:

?Nog aza Churban, yed enei daf zitz en lernen, veren grois in Torah, en gein umutum de ganse weld, to shaffen Torah en Yiddishkeit.?

?After such a destruction everyone must sit and learn become great in Torah and go around the whole world to rebuild Torah and Judaism.?

And that is what his students did, they went to the ganse weld. They came to South Africa and have made a dramatic impact on South African Jewry. The Telz Yeshiva in Cleveland Ohio has given us in South Africa: Rabbi Azriel Goldfein - my Rosh Yeshiva at the Yeshivah Gedolah of Johannesburg, Rabbi Tzadok Suchard - Dayan on the Johannesburg Beth Din and Rabbi of Beth Midrash HaGadol Sandton, and Rabbi Avraham Tanzer - Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivah College School and Rabbi of Yeshiva College Shul, Glenhazel.

You see, this brings us back to my story. My great-grandfather's family from Vorne were murdered together with the Jews of neighbouring Telz. We have emerged from the horror of that brutality severely wounded but undefeated. Those who escaped the horrors of that time have rebuilt with distinction. Rav Elyah Meir and Rav Mottel rebuilt Telz and through it Torah in America and ultimately Torah in South Africa. They trained my Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Azriel Goldfein shlita, and he passed on to me the priceless gift of their inspired scholarship and piety.

I have only told you my personal link in the chain of the history of the holocaust and its aftermath. There are so many other such stories of heroism and survival, of faith and fortitude and resilience and determination not to fail in our Divine mission.

Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, the Rov of Vilna before the war, said that the Torah is compared to water because it can never be destroyed. If it is blocked in one place it springs up elsewhere because it has the vital and eternal energy of being G-d's wisdom. Thus, from the deaths of the killing fields of Europe has sprung new Jewish life across the world. The famous Yeshivos of Europe have been rebuilt in Israel, America, and other places. Like Telz the famous names of Ponevitch, Mir, Slabodka, Baronovich and Brisk have found new locations and the Torah which flourished before flourishes anew.

Many of the remnants of European Jewry found their way to the land of Israel and within 3 short years of the most devastating Holocaust in history the Jewish state was re-established. We often take for granted the miracle of a Jewish state in our Holy Land. Almost 4000 years ago G-d promised the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendents. More than three thousand years ago Joshua led the Jewish people into the land and established a Jewish state. For almost two thousand years since Jews were exiled by the Romans we have been praying for the return to Zion.

An awesome story which illustrates the extent of the momentous nature of the Jewish return to Jerusalem and Israel is that of Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, who about 700 years ago left his native Spain as a result of persecution and idealism and came to Jerusalem. He wrote that everything was in ruins and very few Jews could live in the city. In the midst of the ruins he built a synagogue. That was an act of faith in G-d and the future of the Jewish people. If you go to Jerusalem today you will see that the synagogue of Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman still stands and is in frequent and vibrant use. Can you imagine what Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman would say if he could walk through the streets of Jerusalem today and see hundreds of thousands of Jews praying, learning and living in the Holy City?!

We, the Jewish people, with G-d's help, refuse to be broken by those who seek to destroy us. We are determined to continue our Divine mission. Hitler tried to destroy Jews and Judaism. He said the Third Reich would last for a thousand years and yet it did not last for more than a few. But we have lasted for nearly 4000 years. He failed like all those who tried before him to destroy us. And we all stand here today in solemn and living memory of our 6 million brothers and sisters and say to the world: Am Yisarel Chai [the Jewish people live], Od Avinu Chai [Our Father in Heaven lives].