

Dr Benjamin Orenstein

Berek Pieprz [aka Ben Pepper]

From the earliest years of his youth, Berek Pieprz showed a talent for communal activities. He studied at *Machzikey Ha'Das* and later at the general school. He owed his communal orientation and physical boldness to his belonging to the *Gordonia* youth organisation and the *Makabi* sports club.

In 1937, a pogrom took place in Częstochowa. The Polish hooligans encountered a hefty resistance on ul. Nadrzeczna from the Jewish populace, But, despite the defeat of the attackers, they nevertheless managed to demolish the Old Study-Hall and threw the Torah scrolls, *chumoshim* and *machzorim*¹ into the Warta Rivera.

Berek Pieprz was a young boy at the time and, upon seeing this, he did not think long, but leaped into the river and saved all the sacred artefacts.

His audacity, boldness and quick orientation [viz. reflexes] were of very good use to him during the times of Nazi tyranny.

In the "Small Ghetto", a child was born to the Fuks family - a boy. Keeping the baby was a great peril, and every minute was a wrangle between life and death. The parents arranged for a Christian woman to take the child to be raised. The little boy was eight days old. Berek Pieprz, who was working at Herman's [sic Hellman's] *cegielnia* [Pol., brickyard] not far from Jasna Górska [sic Góra²], where the Christian woman lived, undertook to convey the child there.

On the appointed morning, Dr Przyrowski gave the baby a sleeping injection and also tattooed the heel³ of one of his little feet with blue ink, in order that, if the parents survived the War, they would have the child's mark [by which to recognise him by]. The baby, who was then eight days old, was swaddled in a headscarf and placed inside a hand-satchel, in which two small holes were made in order to let in a little air. Berek Pieprz took the satchel, put himself in the line of the workgroup and marched out to work, like every day.

After marching out of the "Small Ghetto", an unexpected event took place. All the workgroups were stopped at the little [Warszawski] Ryneček. It was a cold winter day in March 1943. The Nazis conducted a selection so as to send away a large group of Jews to Bliżyn. This took time and the baby awoke and began crying. Berek Pieprz began rocking the satchel, but it did not help at all. The situation was serious. Berek Pieprz did not lose himself and he told everyone

¹ [TN: "Chumoshim" are individual tomes of the Pentateuch, which are used by worshippers to follow the public Torah reading, and "machzorim" are special prayer-books for the holidays, which are also kept in study-halls and synagogues for public use.]

² [TN: Hellman's brickyard (nowadays in ruins but still standing) is on ul. Loretańska, in the central Częstochowa district of Podjasnogórska, which, as the name indicates, is adjacent to the Jasna Góra monastery. As the name is written in the original in two words, with the second one ending in "ska" – "Jasna Górska" – it is unclear whether the woman was living in the Jasna Góra monastery itself, which is very unlikely, or in the Podjasnogórska district.]

³ [TN: The primary definition of the Yiddish word used here is heel, but it can sometimes also mean sole of the foot.]

in the group to sing, so that the Nazi supervisors should not hear the child's cries. Luckily enough, no one was selected from the group.

The group was taken to work under the guard of a Ukrainian *Werkschutz* [Ger., factory security officer]. This Ukrainian *Werkschutz*, who was in the service of the SS, showed an unwelcome interest in the satchel and, once again, the situation was bad. Berek Pieprz bought off the Ukrainian and carried out his task to perfection. At the prearranged location, on the corner of the Jasna Górska [sic Góra], he set down the satchel near the house and gave the agreed signal, a whistle, whereupon the Christian woman immediately emerged and took away the baby. The fact is that this child was saved, survived the War and nowadays already has to be twenty-two years old.

Following the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto", the Nazis, just as throughout the entire duration of their sanguinary rule, sent away all the possessions of the [annihilated] Jews to Germany. Certain old items of clothing and old pots and plates, which were not worth taking, were put at the disposal of the HASAG-Pelcery camp. Berek Pieprz was in this camp and worked in transport. He was, therefore, sent along with a few other Jews, under a guard of *Werkschutz* men, with horse and cart, to fetch the items. In the "Small Ghetto", among the ruins, he found an entire array of sacred objects – a Torah scroll, a *megilah*, a *shofar*⁴, prayer-shawls, phylacteries, a set of the Talmud, *chumoshim* and *machzorim*. He quickly concealed all these artefacts under the items in the cart and, thus, they were smuggled into the camp.

He handed over all the sacred objects to Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner, who led a *minyán* [Heb., prayer quorum] at Barrack № 7, delivering a *Daf Yomi*⁵ lesson every day. All this was obviously carried out in strict secrecy. A large number of religious Jews were concentrated in Barrack № 7, such as

- Rabbi Olewski who, after liberation, was the Chief Rabbi of the British Zone in Germany and currently serves as a rabbi in the United States;
- Rabbi Benjamin-Eliezer Borzykowski who, immediately following the War, organised the renowned *Meor Ha'Golah* Yeshiva in Italy and is nowadays in Montreal, where he continues his activities as Dean of the Yeshivah he founded⁶ in Italy;
- Reb Nojeh Edelist, who lives in the State of Israel,

and many others.

Characteristically, Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner and his peers guarded the sacred artefacts like an eye in their head, and the Nazi guards were unable to find them [even] in the strictest searches. Once, in 1944, such a search was suddenly conducted, that all the things, the paper mattresses [filled] with the wood wool, and anything that was in Barrack №7 was thrown outside, whereupon the *Werkschutz* [officer] – a *Volksdeutsch* [ethnic German] named Piotruś [?] – took the sacred objects and destroyed them. Only the *shofar* was saved.

⁴ [TN: A "megilah" (Heb., lit. "scroll") is the Book of Esther in scroll form, which is read on Purim, and a "shofar" is the horn of a ram, which is blown on Rosh Hashanah.]

⁵ [TN: Heb., "Daily Page"; a daily regimen undertaken to study the Babylonian Talmud one folio each day, which was introduced in 1923 by Rabbi Majer Szapira, then Rabbi of Sanok and later dean of the famous Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin (Sages of Lublin Yeshiva), and sanctioned by the vast majority of rabbis in Poland, including Rebbe Awrum-Mordche Alter of Ger, who had the largest Chassidic following in Poland.]

⁶ [TN: As important a part as Rabbi Borzykowski may have played, historical sources accredit both the foundation of the Yeshiva in Italy and its continuation in Montreal to Rabbi Ephraim Oshry of Kaunas.]

Directly following the War, when [the writer] Jacob Pat visited Częstochowa, he was given the miraculously saved *shofar* as a gift.

Berek Pieprz's father, Reb Majer, was a tailoring craftsman, and his mother Chana [*née* Sztylek] was always occupied with the household, which consisted of eight children – five sons and three daughters. In the times of the Nazi massacres, his parents Reb Majer and Chana, all three of his sisters, Jentla, Hinda and Fajga and two of his brothers, Szlojme and Szymon, perished in sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel].

Of the entire family, only three brothers survived: Berek, Jankel [Jacob] and Wolf [William]. Jankel and Wolf live in the US, in New Haven, [Connecticut]. Both of them are married; Jankel has three little daughters and Wolf has one son.

Berek Pieprz, with his wife Cela and their two fine daughters, Miriam and Anna, from 1947 to 1960, lived in Montreal and, since 1960, have lived in New York.