

## The Book Committee

# Religious Life in “HASAG”

Following the liquidation of the “Small Ghetto” in Tamuz 5703 (1943), the few remaining people were taken to the “HASAG” camp. The conditions at the camp were unbearable. At first, all were forced to lay on the bare ground without any cover. The rations were limited to a portion of watery soup and 250 grams of bread.

The religious Jews could not enjoy this meagre allotment of food for fear that it may not be kosher. Labour at the camp was carried out in two shifts, day and night. Before work, in the early morning hours, and also after work in the evening, everyone was required to stand for roll call.

Discipline in the camp was extremely strict. The German foremen kept an eye on those workers who they deemed were not working with the required stamina and tortured them in various ways.

### The “Akcja” at the “HASAG” Camp

On the eve of the 17<sup>th</sup> Tamuz<sup>1</sup> 5703 [20<sup>th</sup> July 1943], the order was suddenly heard, “Go outside!” All the workers, both those who had worked day shift and were sleeping and those who were working, went outside, feeling scared. They were all put into rows and, whoever did not find favour with his foreman, was taken by him out of the row. About 300 labourers were placed in custody at the factory’s police station and, that very same night, they were taken to the cemetery, where they were murdered and thrown into a large mass grave, which had been prepared in advance.

It was on that night that all the Jewish policemen with their families were also detained.

The German foremen struck them over their heads with sledgehammers and, while they were still stunned, loaded them onto freight vans. The victims were driven to the Jewish cemetery and, in a moribund state, they were thrown into a huge grave. Among the detainees was also the camp’s Jewish leader [kapo?], Bernard Kurland, who acted as a proud Jew in the face of his killers. When he saw death before his eyes, he said to the Germans, “The twelfth hour has already arrived for us, but for you too, the twelfth hour is very near.”

Life in the camp continued with greater fear than ever, due to the beatings and death. Decree followed decree. Despite the circumstances and perils, the religious Jews would gather after work in the barracks and engage in Torah discussions from memory, for it was absolutely impossible to have a book. Each would encourage the other not to give up and not to lose confidence and faith. There were two pairs of phylacteries [tefillin] in the camp and the Jews would steal away in the course of the workday to put them on and to recite the “*Sh’ma*” [prayer]. There was great joy when a cobbler - I think his surname was Propinator - managed to smuggle a little Torah scroll into the camp and, from it, we would read on *Shabbes* and holidays after work.

One time, a German gendarme named Stieglitz came in the middle of the Torah-reading and took the scroll away with him. But he returned it in exchange for a pair of shoes, to the great delight of the religious people, who were again able to read from the scroll. (This scroll was brought to Israel

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: The 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz is a day of fast, commemorating the breach of the walls of Jerusalem before the destruction of the Second Temple.]

after many meanderings and is now in my possession. The scroll is read from almost every First of the Month at the [*Gerer*] *shtiebel* in Bnei-Brak.)

When the month of Nisan arrived, the religious Jews began seeing to *matzes* and, in fact, managed to obtain flour from Poles. The *matzes* were baked on an iron cooker between the beds, while someone stood outside as lookout. More than once, a German arrived in the middle of baking and the cooker had to be put out, so that the dough rose. The *Seder* on *Pesach* night was held between the beds, in scarceness and in squalor. Instead of wine, it was borscht, and instead of meat and fish, there were memories and tears. In the morning, when we said the *Hallel* [prayer of praise], some Jews rebelled and yelled at us, "My creations are drowning at sea, and you wish to sing songs?"<sup>2</sup>

As the High Holidays drew near, we requested permission to hold prayer services, but this was denied. We gathered nevertheless and our prayer was accompanied by weeping and wailing.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, as evening approached, one of us (I think it was Dorfgang) managed to get hold of a *shofar* from outside the camp. The news spread throughout the camp and many Jews came to hear the sound of the *shofar*.

"All Israel are Responsible, One for the Other"<sup>3</sup>

Over the course of time, a committee of religious Jews was created, headed by [Reb] Noach Edelist and Reb Jechiel Landau z"l. They collected funds to succour the ill and infirm, who required food and medication to remain alive. Mrs Frajda Landau, the daughter of Reb Szymon Landau z"l, and wife of Reb Jakób Landau, cooked for the patients lying in the camp hospital.

The work in the camp was back-breaking, especially for those who worked the night shift and were unable to rest during the day. On one of the winter nights, Abram Cześćochowski (son of Reb Jakób Cześćochowski) stole into the barrack before the end of the night shift and climbed up to his sleeping place on the third tier of the bunk bed. After just minutes, Bocke, one of the camp's police officers, entered the barrack and approached Reb Noach Edelist, who was then responsible for the barrack. The officer demanded he point out the hiding place of the man who had entered. Reb Noach, knowing what fate awaited the escapee, answered that no one had entered. For this reply, he received two slaps across the cheek and the officer threatened him with his pistol, saying he would kill him unless he revealed where the individual was. But, in the face of the danger, Reb Noach remained silent. When Abram Cześćochowski saw what was happening, he sprang down from his bunk and stood before the German officer. Abram was taken to the police station and, after a terrible beating, was released.

### **Chanukah in the Camp**

As Chanukah neared, the religious Jews began preparing Chanukah lamps, which was a life-threatening project. The candelabras were made of shell casings found in the camp. The oil was taken from automobiles. When the first night of Chanukah came, the Jews gathered in the barracks.

We mentioned the Hasmoneans and told stories about them, comparing those days to the circumstances in the camp. As the candles were lit and the blessings recited, the weeping and sobbing of people remembering how they used to light the candles in their own homes in the

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: Quotation from Talmud Bavli, Megilah 10b.; regarding the parting of the Red Sea: "Rabbi Yochanan said: What is [the meaning of] that which is written: "And the one came not near the other all the night" (Exodus 14:20)? The ministering angels wished to sing their song, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: The work of My hands [viz. the Egyptians] are drowning at sea, and you wish to sing songs?"]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Quotation from Sifra, Bechukosai, Ch.7, 5.]

presence of their family members, who had been murdered by the “Amalekites”, were heard. And thus they remained, glued to the lamps until the candles had blown out. We, of course, did not sing “*Maoz Tzur*” [Chanukah song] out loud. Even without singing, extreme vigilance was required because of the Germans.