

Good Yom Tov Everyone. At an Agudath Yisroel dinner in 1995 commemorating the 50th year since the liberation of Jews from the Nazi death camps, Mr. Yosef Friedenson, editor of the noted magazine 'Dos Yiddishe Vort,' told a moving personal story that lent a historical perspective to the trials and tribulations that Jews have undergone throughout their nearly 2,000 years in the Diaspora.

After being a prisoner and slave laborer in numerous camps, R' Yosef was transported to a steel factory labor camp in Starachowitz, Poland, in 1943, where armaments were made for the German war effort. The brutality of the German officers was unspeakable. Adults and children alike suffered pain and death at the hands of barbarians who roared, "No Jew will escape us, not even a child!"

At this particular camp, however, there was one German factory chief, Herr Bruno Papeh, who was kind to Jews whenever he could be. He would provide them with extra rations of food and was a bit more tolerant when the prisoners failed to complete their labor assignments on time.

While R' Yosef was at Starachowitz, a wine merchant, a Gerrer chassid from Cracow, was brought to the camp. Akiva Goldstoff was close to 40 when he arrived, frightened and disoriented; but before his first Friday night in the camp arrived, he had already organized a minyan for Kabbalas Shabbos.

Akiva and Yosef, who was 20 at the time, became close friends. Despite the difficult circumstances, they exchanged Torah thoughts and encouraged each other in faith and belief.

A few weeks before Pesach, Akiva called Yosef to the side and said, "I think we should ask Herr Papeh if he would allow us to bake matzos for Yom Tov." "You must be mad," replied Yosef. "Herr Papeh has been kind to us in certain circumstances, but he will never allow us such a luxury!"

"I am older than you," said Akiva. "Listen to me; I believe he will be receptive."

After some intense debate, Yosef agreed to go with Akiva to ask the factory chief for permission to bake matzos. When Herr Papeh heard their request, he was incredulous. "Don't you have any other worries? Is this all that is on your minds?" he asked in disbelief. "Yes," replied Yosef. "This is what we are concerned about, and it would mean a great deal to us if you granted permission."

Herr Papeh thought about it for a moment and then said, "All right. If you have the flour, go ahead. Just talk to the Polish workers who are in charge of the smiths' ovens and tell them I gave the consent."

"But we don't have any flour," Yosef said quietly, embarrassed at being granted his wish and not having the means to fulfill it. At that same time, a Polish factory worker was seeking a furlough from Herr Papeh, who controlled the work schedule. Papeh knew that the Polish workers could get the prize commodities of meat and butter from the local villagers and then bring them into the labor camp. Papeh was no saint. He would allow himself to be bribed.

"I'll tell you what," Papeh said, turning to the Polish worker. "You get me a kilo of butter and a kilo of flour, and you can have the time off that you want." The Polish worker agreed, and within a day Yosef and Akiva were called into Herr Papeh's office, where he clandestinely gave them the flour for the matzos.

The two thanked him profusely, but secretly they worried that he could — and with his Nazi temper, would — rescind his permission at any moment.

Several women, including R' Yosef's wife, Gitel, kneaded the dough and baked the matzos in the large melting ovens that had a temperature of 2,000 degrees.

There was an air of controlled ecstasy in the barrack as the matzos emerged from the ovens, ready for those who wanted them.

On the first morning of Pesach, Herr Papeh walked into the factory and suddenly became furious. As always, at 10 a.m., baskets containing slices of bread were passed around the factory and every worker would take a meager slice.

Each slice was accounted for, and no one would dare take more than his share. But instead of taking them, many prisoners left the bread in the doorway.

Herr Papeh looked around at the people eating matzah and realized they had purposely declined the bread. In a violent, bloodcurdling voice he suddenly yelled, "Your G-d has forsaken you, and you are still loyal to Him?!"

Papeh scanned the room and then roared, "Friedenson! Eat your bread or you will die!" Everyone froze. The fury they had feared had suddenly exploded, and at the worst time. None of the men moved as they waited to see what he would do.

Herr Papeh walked directly over to Akiva and yelled, "Has your G-d not forsaken you?" Akiva, standing tall and ready to accept the worst, replied softly but with certainty, "Not totally and not forever." Papeh was taken aback by the answer. He could not comprehend such conviction. He knew well the suffering and torment of the Jews. "Not totally?" he demanded, raising his voice. "You let us bake matzos, didn't you?" Akiva replied. (Along the Maggid's Journey, Rabbi P. Krohn, p. 168)

Let us be inspired by this story to dedicate our lives to serving Hashem with all of our hearts and all of our souls, especially during the holy holiday of Pesach. **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**