

The Yellow Star



S. B. Unsdorfer

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*For these I weep. Mine eye, mine eye runneth
down with water, for comfort is far from me.
(Lamentations 1:16)*

*To the memory of my parents, grandparents,
my sister, her husband and five young children,
my uncles, aunts, and cousins,
who, with six million of their brothers and sisters,
were massacred by the Nazis.*

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Foreword

*Colonel Richard Kemp**

I am writing these words in a dark and malignant wooden hut at Auschwitz-Birkenau, seated on what the author of this book describes as “a hollow brick ledge... [running] down the center of the block from one end to the other.” A ledge like the one upon which Doctor Josef Mengele stood unmoved amidst scenes of heartless brutality, blood, screaming, and despair as he made his ruthless selection on the day Simche Unsdorfer and his family were brought into this place.

Simche Unsdorfer, pale, skinny, and with glasses that seemed bigger than his face, was nineteen years old when he was transported by cattle car to this vast death camp. He has been an inspiration to me for forty years and during many military campaigns since the day

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I first opened his heart-rending account of extraordinary courage in the face of unexampled savagery.

Released from enslavement at Buchenwald as the war in Europe drew to its close, Simche lamented: “We had not the heroic glamor of soldiers who had died on the battlefield, or sailors drowned in the ocean; we were prisoners who had been humiliated and scorned.”

Thrust into the relentless meat-grinder of the Final Solution along with 70,000 of his Slovakian countrymen, Simche had not the opportunity to join the million and a half of his fellow Jews who took up arms on the Allied side during the Second World War. Although denied “the heroic glamor of soldiers” his personal courage was no less inspiring than theirs.

As with their other captives, from the moment of Simche’s arrival in Auschwitz the Nazis used every baleful and cowardly means at their disposal to terrorize him, to degrade him, to brutalize him, to strip him of his humanity, to grind him down, to break his spirit, and ultimately to destroy him.

Yet, viciously torn from his family, hounded from camp to camp, bullied, kicked, beaten, threatened, abused, starved, frozen, and exhausted, this physically far-from-robust teenager did not succumb to the depredations of what he rightly called “history’s greatest savages.” To the last he retained his human decency, his moral resolve, and his unwavering religious faith. To achieve that in the face of such a sustained and brutal onslaught was without question an act of noble defiance. To survive against such tremendous odds was nothing short of victory.

Simche’s victory demanded of him the most colossal courage. It was not that he was unafraid. How could he be? His undiluted fear pervades every page of this book. Not least in the chilling description of his shock on emerging from the dehumanizing halls of the “House of Transformation” as a shaved, bludgeoned, and blue-striped extermination camp inmate: “Then the door was thrown open and, to my horror, I discovered that night had fallen over the Death Cage of Auschwitz.”

Courage is not an absence of fear. It is the strength of will and the moral resolve to overcome that fear. As Simche said of another prisoner who had risked his life to smuggle a pair of sacred *Tefillin*

into the death camp: “The Nazis could kill men but they could not kill courage.”

They did not kill Simche’s courage. It was courage that allowed him to elude almost certain death in Auschwitz by attaching himself to a work party in disobedience to the orders of his S.S. guards. A feat of defiance that risked immediate merciless beating and summary execution.

It was courage that led him to light a *Hanukkah* lamp beneath his bunk to warm his soul and the souls of his spiritually starved and physically distressed fellow prisoners, to inspire them with hope and with faith. A perilous act that “set our hearts ablaze.”

And skeletal, exhausted, starving, soaked to the bone, clubbed by rifle butts, it was courage that gave him the strength to drag a friend who could no longer walk for mile after mile along the quagmire of a ten-day death march towards Buchenwald.

Where did this ordinary nineteen-year-old find his extraordinary courage?

In that great religion of Abraham to which he clung unstintingly during every moment of his terrifying ordeal: “Where would we have gained the courage and strength to survive all our experiences of bestial cruelty, were it not for our great and historic past?”

When a fellow prisoner, a doctor and pre-war city councilor from his home town, demanded of him: “How can God allow all this?” the boy responded: “You must keep your trust in God! You will never regret it.” He tried to inject some hope into the dejected man, but: “I realized that he had neither the physical strength nor the spiritual convictions to survive a hell like Auschwitz. Without these qualities there was little hope of survival.”

Simche drew strength too from the solace and fellowship of his tormented and distressed, yet faithful friends from home who encouraged and guided him during his nightmare of captivity.

But the influence of his revered father, his constant inspiration, was strongest by far. His father, who could have saved himself from the gas chamber, but chose instead to die hand in hand with his frightened, shaking, and frail wife. “How can I leave Mummy

here alone?" were the last words spoken by the much-loved Rabbi of Pressburg to his son. This was not Jeremiah's gentle lamb to the slaughter. It was the Supreme Sacrifice.

In homage to these good and brave people, whose tragic end was the fate of so many millions of Jews, it has been my privilege to place a rock beside the burial pit into which the Nazis dumped their ashes.

Released in 1945 by the American army from the horrors of Buchenwald, Simche reflected: "What would happen to our Jewish nation, to our religion and heritage, after this great and tragic disaster? The face of every Jewish inmate in the camp mirrored a vivid picture of the Jewish people, a race that had suffered the most tremendous spiritual, as well as physical, onslaught in the history of mankind."

Three years later the fragmented Jewish nation was endowed with a miracle: the creation of the State of Israel, the hope of two thousand years. To this day that great country mirrors the courage and moral strength of Simche Unsdorfer; the valiant and selfless blood sacrifice of his father; and the victories of countless other Jewish men, women, and children who resisted the terrors of the Nazi genocide.

But unlike those defenseless people the State of Israel carries the Shield of David and the Sword of Gideon. Seventy years after Simche Unsdorfer arrived here at Auschwitz I had the honor to march alongside a contingent of Israeli soldiers defiantly bearing their national flag through this monument to horror and despair. That flag and the soldiers that guard it represent a sacred covenant that proclaims never again will the Jewish people suffer the fate of Simche Unsdorfer, his family, his friends, and the millions who were victims of the Holocaust.

The flag of Israel, that glorious symbol of hope and of valor, must and will forever be kept flying, whatever the cost may be.

Auschwitz-Birkenau
Holocaust Memorial Day
January 2014

Part One

Bratislava and Sered

Chapter One

It was about eleven A.M. on October 11, 1944, the day after *Simbat Torah*, when I stood in the chilly wind on the dew-covered lawn of an old castle near Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. I began to walk, not for pleasure, but simply because there was nothing else I could do. I covered the short distance of the lawn and then reversed myself and walked back. Not for me the world outside the castle gardens: I was an internee, but only a fake one. Indeed, we were all fakes—all the Jews who herded together in this ancient fortress.

For safety's sake we had faked the Argentine passports which brought my parents and me to this Bratislavian castle because these documents entitled us to an internment under police regulations: an uneasy, suspense-filled internment, to be sure, but one which was preferable to being "free" and at large in a country where everyone's hand was raised against our race.

The war was nearing its end, and the majority of Slovakian Jews had already been deported to German concentration camps during the mass deportations which had taken place in 1942. However, in the latter half of 1944, the few thousand Jews who had been permitted to remain in the country (on the grounds that they were required for

the economic needs of the State) were driven to desperate measures by increasing fears that the Germans, harried by disruptive partisan activity and sabotage, would totally occupy Slovakia.

This handful of Jews, who through a hundred and one miracles had hitherto managed to escape deportation, decided to supply themselves with false South American passports, and on the strength of these, prevail upon the Slovakian puppet government to intern them as foreigners and keep them under its protection until the war was ended.

My father, in his middle fifties, my mother, a few years older, and I, who was nineteen, were among these phony Argentines. The generous dispensation of money eventually convinced the Slovakian police that we were genuine South American nationals and should be interned as such. Thus, on September 20, 1944, one day after *Rosh Hashanah*, and about three weeks after German troops had occupied the country, my parents and I, together with a small number of other families, moved into the old castle in Mariathal, near Bratislava, where we were placed under constant police guard.

We all knew that we were gambling with death, and every time we watched German military police in the vicinity of the castle and saw them questioning the police officers at the gate, we quailed at the slender barrier we had erected to protect ourselves, but we were heartened again and again by the knowledge that the Nazis had never yet attempted to enter and question the internees. As the days dragged on, our hopes rose. Would our trick confound the astute war machine of Hitler?

By *Yom Kippur* there were about 180 people in the castle—men, women, and children. I remember the services conducted on *Yom Kippur* in one of the castle rooms, and the sermon which my father, who was a rabbi, delivered before *Mazkir* (memorial service for the dead).

“Call them all in,” he told me gently, “even those who have forsaken our religion and no longer believe in prayer.”

They all came, and never shall I forget the short parable with which my father illustrated his sermon. Everyone was in tears: that was what he wanted to achieve. “The gates of tears never close,” say

our rabbis. "If nothing reaches the ears of God, the tears of the innocent will always find Him."

My father was a tall, dignified man, ever ready to help and comfort his fellow men. He was a born leader. As I watched the sad expression on the lined face of my mother, and saw how frail she had grown with the ceaseless anxieties of the last five years, I wondered how she would survive a worsening of our perilous position. My brothers and sisters were older than I. I had never been away from home and was extremely attached to my family. I wondered then how long it would be before we were torn apart.

Yom Kippur had been celebrated, and into the uneasy silence that followed came the news that we all had dreaded. German troops, who had occupied the entire country some weeks earlier and had brought with them large detachments of Gestapo and S.S. men, had made a sudden swoop on all Jews in Bratislava and had made the capital "*Judenrein*." The helpless prisoners were herded into the detention camp in Sered. One or two fugitives had managed to reach us, and we had offered them slender sanctuary in the castle, for as they had no documents, they would be immediately discovered should there be an inspection; and that inspection, we felt, was bound to come in the very near future.

New fears and tensions were born during the next two or three days, for after the arrest of the Jews in the capital, we were certain the S.S. would come in search of us. But, as the days went by, and the Festival of *Sukkot* approached, we were once again lulled into a false sense of security and began to build up our shaken morale. It was not possible, we argued, that the Germans were not aware of our being here. If they really wanted us they could have already collected us along with the rest of the Slovakian Jews.

And so the Jewish festivals, including *Sukkot* (one of the Festivals of the Tabernacles), passed by without alarm. This was the only *Sukkot* during the six years of war that we had neither a *Sukkah* (a booth erected for the Feast of Tabernacles) nor an *Etrog* nor a *Lulav* (requisites for religious services).

Even in the darkest months of 1942, when Jews were shipped to Auschwitz by the thousand, we had a tiny hut hidden in the back

of our garden which we used as a *Sukkah*. In that year there was only one *Etrog* and *Lulav* for the whole Jewish community of Slovakia. A trusty gentile was asked to tour the Jewish communities by car with this one set of *Arbaah Minim*, and congregants were informed beforehand at what day and hour they had to assemble in the synagogue in order to have a chance of making the blessing on the *Arbaah Minim*. But on this *Sukkot* in 1944, we had nothing but the memories of all our previous experiences.

Thus, on the day following the festival, October 11, I found myself strolling in the beautiful gardens surrounding the castle, with their tall elegant oak trees and lovely flower beds. I had left my father in his room, after having tried everything possible to keep myself occupied. Father had a six-year-old boy on his lap and was teaching him the *Aleph Bet* (Hebrew alphabet). On the previous day my father had undertaken to spend the whole day teaching adults and children—in fact everyone who wanted to have a lesson was welcome to join him.

My mother was with a number of other women in the huge communal kitchen in the basement where the first kosher meal cooked on the premises was to be prepared. Fish was on the menu. There was no longer any kosher meat because the ritual slaughterers and the kosher butchers had been deported.

I paused in my perambulations at the sound of distant commotion, and to my horror saw that the whole place was surrounded by S.S. men. At the front entrance an S.S. bus and three Mercedes cars drew up, and as I turned round it seemed there was an S.S. man with revolver in hand behind almost every tree. We were besieged!

I raced into the castle, taking the steps two at a time until I reached my father.

“Papa,” I cried. “They’re here... all over the place.”

I was in a panic, as I always was in those years when I had to face a German uniform. The mere sight of a swastika, whether on a flagpole or on a badge, made me freeze with terror.

My father rushed to the window. How glad I was that he no longer wore his rabbinical garb, and that his short but very attractive beard did not reveal his profession. He had been reluctant to

part with the traditional apparel and beard of his vocation, but on the firm advice of many trusted friends, he had shorn his beard and changed into a gray suit a few days before we moved into the castle.

How the S.S. would have enjoyed catching a rabbi! I shudder to think what they would have done to him. Now he looked like a well-to-do company director, much younger than his fifty-five years.

“Quickly,” he ordered, “get Mama up from the kitchen!”

I sped to do his bidding, but I met Mother on the halfway landing. She looked pale and worried, but her calmness conquered my immediate panic.

“They have come to check our passports,” she said as we walked together upstairs.

Back in my father’s room we paced up and down nervously, occasionally glancing out of the window. People were now beginning to queue up on the lawn. We waited fatalistically for our turn, which came only too soon.

The castle trembled under the weight of a crowd of burly S.S. men who raced up to the top floor shouting wildly: “Everybody downstairs! Everybody!”

By now they were all over the castle—on the staircase, in the hall, on the roof, in the cellar, and about the garden. The two castle police officers were confined to their rooms. We were entirely in the hands of the dreaded S.S.

It took them only a few minutes to get the whole 180 of us—men, women, and children—lined up on the first floor landing. An S.S. officer, who I later learned was the notorious *Hauptsturmfuehrer* Anton Brunner, who had been sent to Slovakia with the occupying troops to “take charge” of the Jews, was seated behind an empty desk—two S.S. men, revolvers ready, standing behind him.

Brunner, the commandant of the reception camp in Sered, and of many other concentration camps previously, was a slim, saturnine figure with fair hair and a temper as quick as mercury. He had long, prehensile, apelike fingers which looked as though they itched to be round our throats. His long face wore a perpetually cynical expression, and his gimlet eyes knew no mercy.

As I watched him, the smell of freshly cooked fish from the deserted kitchen engulfed the entire building. The first kosher meal—which no one was to touch, incidentally—was almost ready to be served. Brunner smiled sardonically, unable to hide his pleasure and delight at the sight of 180 newly discovered “political criminals,” while we waited quietly and patiently upon his every word.

“*Passkontrolle*,” he said calmly with that hateful, cynical smile on his long, haggard face.

One by one we showed this savage our passports: Argentine, Bolivian, Brazilian, Cuban, etc. A woman of about forty stood in front of us. She was shaking with fear and worry as she approached him.

“*Bitte*,” she pleaded desperately. “Please, *mein Herr*, my American passport is deposited with the police at Topolcany... I can get it in a day or two... it is a genuine and valid passport, and I would...”

Brunner cut in with his everlasting smirk. “That’s all right. We’ll get your passport for you. If it’s valid and in order, you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

She was showering him with words of thanks and gratitude when Brunner nodded his head curtly and said to the S.S. man behind him: “See that the ‘lady’ queues up downstairs.” He emphasized the word *lady*.

Now it was our turn. My father stepped forward, calm and apparently unmoved by this Nazi terror. He bade Brunner a kindly good-morning, and handed over his passport.

“*Sprechen Sie Spanisch?*” Brunner asked, after glancing at the passport.

“No,” answered my father without hesitation.

“Queue up downstairs!” Brunner ordered, and put the passport on the pile that was slowly growing on his desk.

Next came my mother’s ordeal, and then my own.

It took Brunner less than half an hour to get through the whole line of internees. Now and again he flew into a temper, particularly when someone answered his question with, “Yes, I do speak Spanish!” This seemed to infuriate him, and without attempting to test the truth

of the statement, he would jump from his seat screaming: “You dirty liar; get in the queue downstairs before I use the gun on you!”

No one dared argue with him; it would have been of no help, anyway.

When the last family had marched downstairs, we were ordered to line up once more and stand five deep. We were filled with apprehension and grim forebodings. What would happen next?

We were completely encircled by S.S. men while Brunner paced up and down the line as if taking a salute on parade. Carefully he counted and recounted his catch. His temper was forgotten. Once again he expressed his pleasure and delight by baring his teeth in a wide, jubilant smile, and by rubbing his hands gleefully. Obviously he was deriving keen enjoyment from torturing us by making it clear that our fate was entirely in his hands, that we were all at his mercy, and that his every word could mean life or death to us. He paused sometimes as if about to speak, then he would change his mind and recount us.

Brunner kept us waiting in this torture for minute after minute. He well knew how to tauten suspense and heighten tension until they became almost unbearable.

All this time we stood stiffly at attention while he examined each one of us closely, boring into our eyes as if he were going to wrest our poor secrets from us by sheer willpower.

Then quite suddenly he moved a few steps backwards and shouted: “You have fifteen minutes to get packed. Don’t take too many things with you because you’ll have to walk eight kilometers to the nearest railway station at Stupava.”

I looked at my father. As always in these years of terror and panic, he kept cool and calm, reassuring us of his complete faith in the Almighty as Savior and Guardian of His people.

“We’d better put on two shirts and double underwear,” he advised, as we got back into our room. “It will make our luggage lighter, and anyway they will surely not take away what is on our bodies.”

We dressed quickly. Father took down his rucksack and put in his *Tallit* and *Tefillin*; Mother took her candlesticks and a packet of

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candles for the Sabbath lights; I filled mine with food and fruit and all the cigarettes that we had stored in our cupboard.

Within fifteen minutes the whole troop of S.S. re-invaded the house and threw out everyone who was not completely ready. Some came down in their shirtsleeves, and some without coats or hats, but everyone obeyed the fifteen-minute order and stood stiffly at attention awaiting the next move of the fiend who would determine their destinies.