

## ***What Price Tefillin?***

*Dedicated to the memory of Reb Yitzchak ben Dov [Thaler]*

*It's a quiet winter's evening in Jerusalem. The Fast of the Tenth of Tevet has just ended. I (Yaakov Cass) broke the fast and rested from a day of work that had been a little harder than usual, due to the fast. I began to think for the thousandth time about a story that I just heard from my friend Shlomo concerning his father who had lived through the Nazi terror.*

Yitzchak Thaler was born in Dej, Transylvania (once part of Hungary, now Romania) and was orphaned from his mother at the age of four and from his father at the age of 11. His father remarried and after he died Yitzchak was looked after by his stepmother, Chana, who had her own children to care for, as well.

She did her best under the circumstances and Yitzchak remained grateful to her for the rest of his life. Every year, two days after the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, the day he thought she perished in Auschwitz, he faithfully said “*kaddish*” for her.

All of Yitzchak's brothers and sisters emigrated to America long before the war broke out, while he went to study in Dej, under the great Rav Yaakov Elimelech Panet, the Chief Rabbi of Transylvania, who subsequently perished in Auschwitz with his wife and all his children. Although Rav Panet was offered the opportunity to be smuggled out of Dej to safety he refused, saying a “shepherd does not leave his flock.”

After completing his studies in Dej, Yitzchak went on to Towhead to study at the Yeshiva of Rav Mordechai Brisk, referred to as the “Mahakam” Brisk. HaRav Brisk too perished in Auschwitz after refusing to be parted from his precious students.

When Yitzchak reached the tender age of 17 the hell of the Nazi fury bent on the destruction of world Jewry descended in full force on East European Jewry. Yitzchak was deported to a labour camp somewhere in Poland. Before he left he made himself a belt with pockets, in which he hid three things: a Yaakov Emden *Siddur*, his treasured *tefillin*, and the “*Noam Elimelech*” (a religious – Chasidic book written by the Rebbe, Reb Elimelech of Lizhinsk).

Despite the horrible and almost unbearable hardships, during the never ending days and nights that followed his eventual placement in a Nazi labour camp, Yitzchak managed to don *tefillin* each and every day as long as it was possible. Eventually however the *tefillin* were lost, and the “*Noam Elimelech*” was “borrowed” and never returned.

Thereafter, he didn't even see a pair of *tefillin*. Somehow surviving the tortures of the camp, he hoped that liberation would enable him to return to a normal life.

It was not to be.

He was “freed” by the Russians, and taken captive along with the very same Nazi sub-human soldiers who had so cruelly tortured him. They were sent to a labour camp in the deepest northern recesses of the Soviet Union, near the North Pole in a place called Achangeltz. In the winter it was dark nearly all of the time and in the summer, even though the sun shone nearly all of the time it was still permanently dark and bitter!

Yitzchak was sent to work at hard labour once again together with the other Jewish prisoners. Only the Jews were forced to work, the Nazis were considered prisoners of war and so ironically the torturers rested while the tortured were enslaved.

After years of trying his best to hang on to life, literally living from one day to the next, Yitzchak was approached by a fellow Jewish inmate who had observed how Yitzchak was trying his best to cling onto the Jewish way of life and its Jewish traditions.

"A prisoner in another bunk has died and I have "inherited" his "*tefillin*" They are for sale!"

The news electrified Yitzchak. He could not recall when he had last seen a pair of *tefillin* and now the opportunity to purchase a pair presented itself. His heart pounded as he asked. "How much"?

'The price? TEN DAYS' BREAD RATIONS!'

[Before you read further just pause for a second and realise that the day's bread ration was the only food these Jewish prisoners received. Forgoing the bread ration meant starving. I once heard from a survivor of Auswitch that the monetary value of a slice of bread in Auswitch in 1944 would translate into the cost of a skyscraper in Manhattan today and probably more! But put aside the monetary value and consider it from another perspective.]

Remember how you felt last Yom Kippur as the Fast was terminating? Now imagine that you had spent the day chopping down trees in temperatures of below minus 30 °C for 12 hours or more, not having eaten anything before the fast, nor eating when it ended. Then multiply that exponentially by 10!

In reality giving one's bread ration for ten whole days in a Russian labour camp was none other than a one-way suicide ticket.

Well, somehow or other, almost unbelievably, Yitzchak made it through ten days of starvation, living on peels and water. Heaven helped him and he survived the camp and eventually made it to America where he continued to use those very same *tefillin* for the next FORTY YEARS, checking them every few years to see if they were still kosher. His son used them, as well, when the pair ordered for his *bar mitzvah* failed to appear on time.

Eventually Reb Yitzchak decided, for personal reasons, that it was time to get new *tefillin* and the camp *tefillin* were carefully put away.

Two years ago when his son Shlomo was visiting from Israel, Yitzchak asked him to take the *tefillin* back to Israel with him.

'Why'? he was asked in return.

'Because when my time comes, I want them buried with me. I want to have something in my hand. I want them with me in the burial plot in Jerusalem I purchased 16 years ago.'

A long discussion followed: maybe they are still kosher, let's get them checked, think of all the good things that could be done with them etc. Finally, Yitzchak smiled and said, "Do as you wish."

So the *tefillin* came to Jerusalem and were taken to a *sofer* [scribe] to be checked. The next day Shlomo went back to the *sofer* who had the *tefillin* open on his table.

"Which *tzadik* [saintly Jew] wrote these?" the *sofer* asked. "I have never seen such *tefillin* in my life. They are at least 100 to 150 years old and they look as if they were written yesterday as the ink is incredibly clear and fresh. Sadly, they have questions regarding their *kashrus* [kosher status]. Time has damaged them and their boxes and they are too fragile to repair."

Shlomo went from *sofer* to *sofer* and heard the same thing each time: 'The most beautiful parchments I ever saw, as if they were written yesterday...but there are questions to their *kashrus*.'

Now he understood his father's insistence, and also his smile as he said, "Do as you wish."

Less than three months before this fast day on 18 Tishrei 5770, (on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkot 1999), Yitzchak passed away and was buried in Jerusalem. On the day of the funeral, Shlomo had his children photograph these precious *tefillin* before he took them with him to the funeral.

Reb Yitzchak's wish to be buried together with his *tefillin* was conveyed to the burial society who politely refused.

"It's just not done" they said.

At the funeral parlour, Shlomo told the story of the *tefillin* to the assembled mourners. The members of the *Chevra Kadisha* turned to each other and said, "If that's the price he paid for these *tefillin*, we will just have to make an exception."

And so they did.

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**Source:** Written and submitted by **Yaakov Cass**, who heard it from **Rabbi Shlomo Thaler**, son of Yitzchak Thaler.

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**Connection:** Seasonal -- This week, on Tuesday, is the sunrise-to-nightfall Fast of the Tenth of Tevet. It commemorates the onset of the siege outside the walls of Jerusalem that led to the destruction of the Holy Temple on the Ninth of Av. In addition, in our times it has

become the date to say Kaddish for those martyrs of the Holocaust (and all the others through the centuries) whose date of death is unknown.