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CAPTURED! – by the Nazis, by the Rabbi, by the Holy Letters

Rabbi Hershel Schacter [not to be confused with Rabbi Hershel Schachter, the Rosh Kollel at YU] was a prominent American Rabbi with a distinguished career in the rabbinate and in public Jewish life. Before then, during World War II, he was a chaplain in the Third Army's VIII Corps and was the first US Army Chaplain to enter and participate in the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp shortly after it had been liberated by General George Patton's troops on April 11, 1945.

Rabbi Schacter was appalled at the sights that he encountered when entering Buchenwald. He was so shocked that he decided to stay there until he could make a more substantial contribution to the survivors. While other American personnel begged to leave Buchenwald due to the unbearable stench, Rabbi Schacter stayed for months, tending to survivors and leading religious services. Never once did he ever mention any bad odor to anyone. His tremendous devotion to his fellow Jews and their religious needs was his supreme goal; everything else was trivial.

Yechezkel¹ was a young man from a Polish Chasidic family. Rabbi Schacter found him charming and took a special liking to the boy. Yechezkel had lost his entire family during the war and had completely renounced his faith in G-d. Yechezkel defiantly told the rabbi about his plans to totally assimilate and live the rest of his life in post-war Germany, without even a trace of Judaism. Rabbi Schacter listened sympathetically and tried to offer his moral support. They talked often.

Some time after his arrival in Buchenwald, Rabbi Schacter organized a train transport for 200 boys to Switzerland. Each boy was issued a special ticket from the Swiss government, and Rabbi Schacter was responsible for distributing them to the boys. He also knew that this was a desperate time for these survivors, and they needed to get more than 200 of these boys into Switzerland. So he invited another survivor who was an expert artist to create additional tickets. His craftsmanship was such that you could not tell the difference between the original and the copy.

Rabbi Schacter distributed the copies, so nearly 400 boys were planning to make the special trip. He also offered Yechezkel a ticket, but the boy absolutely refused. He wanted no part of restarting a Jewish life again, and reminded the rabbi that he planned to resettle in Germany.

The day came when the train for Switzerland arrived at Buchenwald. Rabbi Schacter told Yechezkel, "Look, even if you don't come with us to Switzerland, at least come to see us off when we board the trains." Yechezkel reluctantly agreed.

¹ *Yechezkel is a pseudonym, to protect his family's privacy.

A young mother and her small son were desperate to get out of Buchenwald, but babies were not allowed on this transport. She approached the rabbi in tears.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you out” Rabbi Schacter said. “Get on the train, and hide in one of the lavatories. Lock the door. Under no circumstances shall you open it unless I call you personally.” He gave them some food to tide them over.

The 400 boys made their way onto the train. Rabbi Schacter was rushing to and fro, making sure each boy was accounted for. All the while, Rabbi Schacter was scanning the crowd, wondering if Yechezkel would show up.

As the train was ready to depart, Yechezkel came up to shake the rabbi’s hand. “Yechezkel, it’s so nice of you to come and say goodbye!” And with that, he grabbed the boy’s hand and with a burst of strength that surprised both of them, he hauled Yechezkel onto the train in a smooth motion, just as it was starting to pull out of the station!

Yechezkel was shocked and furious, and Rabbi Schacter told him he just did it on impulse, but to please not be so angry. It didn’t help. Yechezkel was steaming!

Finally, the train made its way to Switzerland. Their arrival was an adventure in itself. The Swiss protested that there was double the number of boys they expected.

Rabbi Schacter coolly threatened to call a press conference to tell the world that Switzerland is refusing entry to destitute war orphans. He meant it. The Swiss quickly backed down. The mother and child also made it safely without incident.

Some time after their arrival Rabbi Schacter attempted to put together a minyan on Shabbat. There was easily enough people for *Shacharit* (the Morning Prayer), but *Mincha* (the Aternoon Prayer) proved difficult. He could only find nine men, including himself.

The rabbi did not give up. Remembering Yechezkel, he went in search of the young man, who was not happy to see him. He was still cursing his lot at having been kidnapped.

“Yechezkel, I need you for a *minyan*.”

“Are you crazy? Absolutely not!”

“But we only have nine. We need a minyan in order to *davven* (pray) and *lein* (read from the Torah scroll).”

“Oh really? Well, *you* need a minyan. *I* do not!” To prove his point, he brazenly lit up a cigarette.

Rabbi Schacter would not stop now. “Yechezkel, I’m begging you. Just come in to the tent – we’ll pray quickly”.

In a huff, Yechezkel replied, “Fine! Just this once!” He entered the makeshift shul with a scowl.

The nine men who would be praying started the preliminaries, followed by *Kaddish*. All the while, Yechezkel made sure everyone knew how unhappy he was. Rabbi Schacter then took out the *Sefer Torah* that had been lent to them for that Shabbat, rolled it to the correct place for the reading, and asked if any of the men knew how to read. They all shook their heads.² Yechezkel, meanwhile, was looking longingly outside the tent, apparently distracted.

“What now?” thought Rabbi Schacter, and then remembered something.

“Yechezkel!”

“What do you want,” the boy replied, icily.

“Didn’t you tell me you were a *ba’al koreh* (qualified Torah-scroll reader) before the war?”

“Maybe. So what?”

“So you’re the only one of us who knows how to *lein*. We need to hear the Torah reading for this Shabbat afternoon.”³

“There you go again with your ‘We need to....’ *You* might need to. I certainly don’t!”

“Yechezkel, please! This is the first chance in years for people to hear the Torah publically read. I’m begging you. I know you can do this!”

With extreme reluctance, Yechezkel threw his cigarette outside, and approached the table. He cast an expert glance at the unrolled *Sefer Torah* and immediately found the starting point. “Okay,” he sighed. “Let’s get on with it.”

Another man was called to the Torah and made the blessing. “...*who has chosen us from all other nations and given us the Torah....*”

“Amen,” Yechezkel found himself saying automatically. It came back so easily. Yechezkel began to read the 3300-year-old sacred text.

Something unexpected happened. The holy letters of the precious scroll seemed to jump off the page and hit him in the face with full force. He looked as if he was literally being struck with the powerful black letters, and that they were searing his soul.

² It’s complicated. In the scroll there is not punctuation, no tune marks, no vowels, and no break between verses.

³ On Shabbat morning, the weekly portion is divided into seven sections. That same Shabbat afternoon (and the following Monday and Thursday mornings), the first of the seven portions of the new week’s portion is publically read.

Yechezkel's angry veneer had been shattered. He broke down crying like a baby, and barely got through the Torah reading.

When he had begun to read, it had been someone else's Torah. Now he had reclaimed it.

And it had reclaimed him!

Yechezkel was forever changed by that single Torah reading. He returned to the path of mitzvah fulfillment and remained Torah-observant for the rest of his life. He built a beautiful Jewish family in Australia and championed Torah causes there in his city. Yechezkel also stayed a devoted friend to the Schacter family for many decades.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the article by Rabbi Shlomo Horwitz, who heard the story from Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter in June 2014, the son of Rabbi Hershel, and posted it on the OU site (ou.org) on July 31, 2018.

Submitted to Ascent by Yitzchak Dorfman

*Biographical note* (from the Arutz 7 eulogy):

Rabbi Hershel Schacter (1917-2013) served as Rabbi of the Mosholu Jewish Center [walking distance from where I grew up] in the Bronx for more than half a century, was president of Mizrachi-Hapoel Hamizrachi, founding chairman of the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry and in 1956 he was a member of the first rabbinic delegation to the USSR. He also served as chairman of the Chaplaincy Commission of the Jewish Welfare Board, Director of Rabbinic Services at Yeshiva University, and on the Board of the OU for decades.