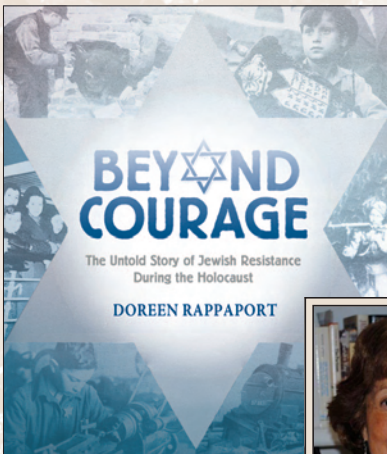


Keeping One's Faith

A Conversation Between Author Doreen Rappaport and Holocaust Survivor Israel Cohen



Doreen Rappaport

Reading about life during the Holocaust, I was astounded by how so many Jews, in their weakened, demoralized conditions in ghettos and concentration camps, defied the Nazis by upholding Jewish traditions and practices. One memoir that I read, *Destined to Survive: Uplifting Stories from the Worst of Times*, deeply affected me, and I set out to find its author.

Israel Cohen, a Chassidic Jew from Lodz, Poland, now lives in Toronto, Canada. We spoke over the telephone many times. Cohen lost his entire family during the Shoah, yet he has emerged with his deep faith in God intact, and an optimistic, loving, and humorous nature, which came out in our many telephone conversations. — *Doreen Rappaport*

DR: How did you feel arriving at Auschwitz, when a Jewish *kapo* immediately took away your *tefillin* that you used for daily prayer?

IC: When we got to Auschwitz they were beating us as we came off the cattle cars. All around us was shouting and screaming. Our minds were numb. We didn't have any feeling for anything. We couldn't think about anything but trying to move with the crowds and looking around for our families.

In Kaufering Eight labor camp, we secretly put together a *minyan* on the first night of Rosh Hashanah. Each person who remembered a part of the prayers said them, and we chanted along. But on the second day, in the middle of our prayers, we were herded into cattle cars to our new "home," Kaufering Four.

When Passover came, I was determined not to eat any bread. My friend Yossel told me that I was too weak and sick to forgo my bread even for a day. But on the first night of Passover, I didn't eat anything but the soup. When the lights went out at night, Yossel and I recited the parts of the Haggadah we remembered.



Israel Cohen

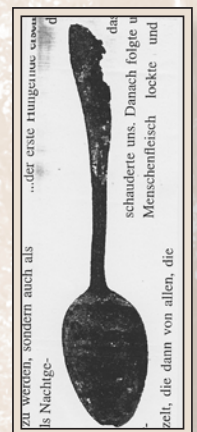
DR: As a deeply religious person, were you able to say your daily prayers or observe the holidays in the camps?

IC: Walking to work every day, I often prayed. I prayed silently, of course, so the *kapos* wouldn't hear. One day in Auschwitz, I saw another Jew taking out a pair of *tefillin*. I

begged him to let me put them on. I risked my life to do that for just a minute.

DR: What were your thoughts when Hanukkah came?

IC: I remembered how God helped the Jews overthrow the Greeks and chased them out of Israel so our people could observe the Torah. I thought about my family at Hanukkah, about my father's joy and fervor when he lit our menorah. And then I knew we had to find a way to at least light Hanukkah candles and say the prayers. And we did. My spoon served as the menorah. Someone gave margarine that he had saved to be the oil. We unraveled threads from our uniforms and wove them into wicks and then lit the wicks.



DR: To what do you attribute your surviving the camps and your many losses?

IC: It depends on how you look at life's experiences. I look on what happened with great faith. I believe everything that happens is predestined, and so you have to live with these things. You couldn't survive a day in the camp without thinking this way. I felt God was in the camp, too. People in the camps didn't lose faith. The Jews who came to the camps with faith kept it; the ones who didn't have faith when they arrived, didn't keep it.

DR: Was there ever a time when you felt like giving up?

IC: After liberation, I learned that my sister, Mirel, had survived, so I returned to Lodz to find her and learned that anti-Semitic Poles had killed her. When it hit me that I was completely alone in the world, I didn't want to go on anymore.

DR: When I ask you about your life, or when you tell your story to others, how do you feel revisiting that time?

IC: When I tell the story of what happened to me, I am there. And telling what happened affects me very much. It's very hard and painful and upsetting. Even talking to you now will affect me all day. But I must speak about these experiences because I am fulfilling the last wishes of those who did not survive the Holocaust and were lost without a trace. It's not just my story. I told my children about what happened as they were growing up. I told them that we are part of the Jewish nation. Many Jews did not want to talk about it, but I did.

DR: What kinds of questions do people ask you after you tell your story?

IC: Many people ask me, why did it happen? Why did God let it happen? That is something that I don't know. Either you believe or you don't. There is no rational answer. Even the great rabbis don't have an answer. But I keep on believing. You don't know the answer, but you still keep on praying.



Israel Cohen, his wife, Perle and their grandson Noach at his bar mitzvah in 2012.

DR: What helped you to reconstruct your life in Canada?

IC: My wife brought me back to the present. To her I owe the most in my efforts to become a sane and healthy person. I still live in

the past often times. But in the camps, I thought that if I survived, I would start a family and rebuild my life. I lost everyone from my family and created a different world. We can't stop living; we have to go on. Whatever happens, whomever you lose, it's very sad, but you must go on.



In Toronto every Hanukkah, Israel lights his "most original" menorah. It consists of eight glasses half filled with colored water. Olive oil rests on top of the water. Eight wicks are inserted in plastic floaters and lit.



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