

Lulek: Child of Buchenwald

When Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau shuts his eyes and recalls his childhood, his mind is crowded with images of trains, of boots pounding on pavement, of barking dogs. He hears children wailing, "Mamme! Tatte!" as they're torn from their parents' arms, the Gestapo screaming, "Schnell, schnell!" as they wield their clubs, and always, the dogs barking.

"My first memory," says Rav Lau, characteristically weighing his words, "is of my father, standing with the rest of the Jews in the courtyard of the main shul in Piotrkow, as the Germans 'selected' those who would be deported that day. That's the image that stays with me always, wherever I go.

"I'm a five-year-old boy, stretching myself up as high as I can, to see my father. He's standing in the center, with his impressive beard and his black rabbinical garb, and all the Jews crowded around him. Suddenly a member of the Gestapo strides over to him and hits him hard on his back. My father reels forward from the blow, but straightens himself immediately. He's mustering all his strength so as not to fall at the feet of the German and cause his fellow Jews to lose morale. Then comes another blow, and another. My father makes a mighty effort not to lose his balance, to help the members of his kehillah, his community, keep up their courage.

"The worst part of it was witnessing the humiliation. A child can't bear to see his father, the hero he looks up to and identifies with, being demeaned. Today, as I look back on those six years of war, it's clear to me that it wasn't the hunger, nor the cold, nor the physical pain of being hit, but the humiliation. To see your father beaten with a club, kicked by hobnailed boots, threatened by a dog, almost falling to the ground, degraded before everyone -- that's a picture that stays with a child.

"But I hold on to the other part of the memory, too. I see my father, with tremendous moral courage, keeping himself from falling, not begging for mercy, standing up straight in front of the Gestapo officer. This erases my feelings of helplessness."

Although Rav Lau has often been urged to write his autobiography, he has never done so. His book, *Al Tishlach Yadcha el haNaar* (The title is from Genesis 22:12 -- "Raise not your hand against the lad ..."), can't be called an autobiography. It makes no mention of his nearly five decades of the rabbinate and public service; rather it is a very personal Holocaust memoir, a tale of survival, escape, and starting a new life in Eretz Yisrael.

A CHILD IN A PILE OF CORPSES

"Lulek," as Rav Lau was then called, was two years old when the war broke out, and eight when he was liberated from Buchenwald.

Rav Lau begins to speak of his second Holocaust image: The Americans have arrived; Buchenwald is liberated. "I remember the looks of horror on the faces of the American

soldiers when they came in and stared around them. I was afraid when I saw them. I crept behind a pile of dead bodies and hid there, watching them warily.

"Rabbi Herschel Schachter was the Jewish chaplain of the division. I saw him get out of a jeep and stand there, staring at the corpses. He has often told this story, how he thought he saw a pair of living eyes looking out from among the dead. It made his hair stand on end, but slowly and cautiously he made his way around the pile, and then, he clearly remembers coming face-to-face with me, an eight-year-old boy, wide-eyed with terror. In heavily-accented American Yiddish, he asked me, 'How old are you, mein kind?' There were tears in his eyes.

"'What difference does it make?' I answered, warily. 'I'm older than you, anyway.'

"He smiled through his tears and said, 'Why do you think you're older than me?'

"And I answered, 'Because you cry and laugh like a child. I haven't laughed in a long time, and I don't even cry anymore. So which one of us is older?'"

Rav Lau's terrible childhood, if it can be called a childhood at all, undoubtedly shaped his character. Yet, amazingly, it didn't affect him as it did so many others. In the long run, rather than turning him into a traumatized, fearful person, it increased his optimism.

"I have an optimistic outlook on life, and I like people," he says. "This is how I counteracted my childhood experiences. As a child, I didn't follow the dictum of 'honor your fellowman, but be wary.' My rule was 'be doubly wary.' Even after the liberation, I was still suspicious of people. For example, I had a mortal fear of cameras. To see someone pointing something at me, squinting one eye, and taking aim -- it terrified me. It took time for me to realize that no one was trying to kill me anymore. But once I understood that, I made a complete turnabout. I can't explain how it happened. It may be connected to the fact that I really had no childhood. I never had the chance to develop an ego at the usual age of two, three, four, five years. I was more like a little animal, a hunted animal bent only on survival, and therefore, the humiliation didn't touch my inner core."

A CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Following an order more meaningful than chronology, Rav Lau moves on to his third memory:

"We were sitting, in total darkness, hundreds of women and children crowded into the shul, aware of almost nothing except that our lives were hanging in the balance. Sometime in the middle of the night, the doors opened. A beam of light showed two Gestapo men standing guard in the doorway, leaving a narrow passage between them. One of them announced, 'I will now read out a list of names. Whoever hears his name called is to get up immediately and go home. Schnell, schnell!'"

"The first name called was Chaya Lau, my mother's name. She didn't move; she was

waiting to hear the names of her two sons, Shmuel and Yisrael, so that we could all leave together. The German officer finished reading off the list. Our names had not been called. It was clear that the fate of those who hadn't been released was sealed. Meanwhile, the Germans had been counting the figures that passed between them, and they started shouting that one person was missing. 'I'm coming! I'm coming!' my mother called out hastily. She held the two of us close to her sides and, walking sideways as one body, we passed between the soldiers.

"There was no need for her to tell us to keep quiet and cling to her; our survival instincts told us that. She'd made her plan quickly, hoping that under cover of darkness she could pass the three of us off as one. But one of the soldiers sensed that there was too much movement in the doorway for one person. He spread his arms and brought them down hard. I'd gone out first, followed by my mother and Shmuel. She and I were knocked down by the Gestapo man's blow. We fell into a puddle of rain that had collected in front of the entrance to the shul, but we were out. My brother Shmuel was knocked back into the shul, and the doors were closed. "We went back to our empty house at 21 Pisudski Street. My mother tried to soothe me to sleep, but I never shut an eye. Some time later, I heard a scream out in the street. I stood on my bed and looked out of the window. A young woman with a baby in her arms was lying in a pool of blood; a Gestapo man was kicking her body from side to side, looking for jewelry. I stood there, paralyzed, until I felt my mother's touch on my shoulder. Silently, she put me back to bed.

"My father came in a few minutes later. I remember how strange he looked without his beard. He had been trying to get Shmuel released. A German officer had promised to arrange it in exchange for my father's gold watch. As soon as he had the watch in hand, the Nazi had turned his back on my father and laughed.

"We won't be seeing Shmuel any more,' my father told me, with tears flowing from his eyes. Shmuel was sent to Treblinka that night."

ON TATTE'S KNEE

"That was also the last time I saw my father," Rav Lau recalls. "I have very few memories of him. In my earliest memories, from the innocent days before war existed in my world, I would sit on his lap and play with his curly peyote (sidecurls)." But that image quickly fades; in its place, Rav Lau's fourth Holocaust image appears:

"Men were gathered around the table in our house, listening as my father talked about the current situation. The worry lines were clearly etched on his face. This image, and the heavy atmosphere of fear surrounding it, has remained a part of me to this day.

"Today, I look at the pictures of my father displayed in my house, and I think of him often. At every special occasion, joyous or sad, I miss him. He was a very gifted speaker, I've been told, and every time I have to deliver a speech I wonder, how would my father have phrased these thoughts?

He's with me everywhere I go."

A STOLEN APPLE

"Before we went into hiding in the place my father had arranged for us, my mother baked a big batch of her special honey cookies. She knew they were a sure way to distract me and, most importantly, to stop my mouth when we had to be quiet. I can remember looking at her with my mouth full of cookies, as if to say, 'This really isn't necessary, Mamma. I know I mustn't make a sound. I may be only a little boy, but I've been through enough to know what this war is all about.' But I can still recall exactly how those cookies tasted, and the memory of their sweetness comforts me in times of bitterness.

"The Germans came one day, searching for Jews. The entrance to our attic hiding-place was open, but by miracle, their attention was drawn to a pile of scrap wood on the floor. They jabbed their bayonets into the pile, thinking there might be Jews hiding there, and then they went away.

"Years later, when I was serving my first term as chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, an elderly Jew from London came to my office without an appointment, explaining that he wanted to ask the rabbi's forgiveness. I told my secretary to show him in, and he said, 'Hello, Lulek. I'm Mottel Kaminetzki. I was in hiding with you and your mother in Piotrkow, and I stole an apple from you. I'm sure you never knew it was missing, but it's been on my conscience all these years.'

"He had also been a child then, just a few years older than I was. My mother had brought a bag of apples when we went into hiding, and the bag was sitting open next to me. At some point, Mottel couldn't resist; when we weren't looking, he grabbed an apple and took a big bite. It was just at that moment that the Germans came to search for Jews, and poor Mottel was stuck with the piece of apple in his mouth. It was too big to swallow, and he didn't dare chew it, for fear of making a sound"

"GOODBYE TULEK! GOODBYE LULEK!"

The sixth image is of Rav Lau's mother, his final image of her:

"I was separated from my mother in November, 1944," says Rav Lau. "I can still hear the Germans yelling 'Schnell, schnell!' as they crowded us onto the train platform. The trains, the boots, and the dogs were all there. My brother Naftali, who was eighteen, had been put with a group of men, and I was with my mother. Women and children were being shoved into one freight car, men into another.

"At the last second before boarding the train, my mother gave me a hard shove -- over to the men, whom she hoped would be used for labor and not killed. 'Tulek!' she called to my brother. 'Take Lulek! Goodbye, Tulek! Goodbye, Lulek!'

"I never saw her again.

"It took a long time until I understood that by pushing me away like that, my mother had saved my life."

"There'd been no time to discuss whether Mamma's move was best. All I knew was that I'd been separated from my mother, by force, and I took out all my rage on Tulek, hammering on his chest with my little fists. He tried to hold me, to soothe me, but I refused to calm down. I remember how terribly cold I felt all over; that was the cold of November, 1944.

"The men gave me hot coffee to drink, but I spit it out, and cried myself to sleep. Never in my short life had I cried like that, and never in all the long years since then. It took a long time until I understood that by pushing me away like that, my mother had saved my life."

THE SPEECH OF HIS LIFE

After that, Lulek had to fend for himself. Rav Lau's seventh Holocaust image finds him standing in muddy snow in the Czenstochova labor camp.

"We boys were standing in a row in front of the German commander, each of us with his father behind him. In my case, since I was already an orphan, my brother Naftali stood behind me. The commander was shouting, 'What do I need these accursed children for? They're non-productive and they're costing me money. We'll have to get rid of them!'

"While the other boys trembled with fear, I used my foot to push some snow and gravel into a little pile. It was about two inches high, but I imagined that if I stood on this little hillock, I'd look taller and my words would carry more weight, and maybe then the commander wouldn't kill us all.

"I took a step forward, stood on my 'platform,' and said, 'Sir! Why do you say we aren't productive? In the Piotrkow ghetto, I worked in the glass factory for eight hours a day nonstop, carrying huge bottles of drinking water for the workers in the factory, where the temperature was 140 degrees.

For a whole year I did this, in snow, in storms, in heat, carrying heavy bottles into that blazing hot room. And then I was only five and a half years old. Now that I'm so much bigger, I can do more than that. If I could work in the Hortenzia glass factory, why can't I work here?'

"If witnesses hadn't told me that this really happened, I wouldn't believe it myself; I would think my memory was playing tricks on me. But the fact is that the Nazi officer was convinced. The Almighty gave me confidence and put the right words into my mouth.

"As a result of my little speech, the commander let it be known that he would redeem

any child in the camp for a price of 1,000 marks. Our mother had foreseen circumstances like these and provided us with two diamonds and a gold watch. 'These will help you keep your promise to Tatte, that you'll take care of Lulek,' she had explained to my brother Naftali. A Jewish dentist had filled her tooth with a half-carat diamond, and she had sewn a two-carat stone into the lining of her coat. Those diamonds saved my life twice."

ALONE IN A FREIGHT CAR

"In January, 1945, we were marched to a train station once more. As we were boarding the train, the Gestapo officer on duty noticed me clinging to my brother. He grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and flung me into a group of about fifty women and a few children, who were being packed into another car. That car was going to be detached from the train at a certain point and redirected to a different camp.

"Meanwhile, Naftali was crowded into a car at the other end of the train, along with the men. He remembered the promise he'd made to our father; he would do anything he could to protect me and to ensure that our family line would continue. The first time the train stopped, he sneaked out, slipped under the train, and crawled along the tracks to the next car. 'Lulek! Lulek!' he called. He looked for me in every car, trying again at every stop, until he reached the women's car at the front of the train where I was, still clinging to the feather pillow my mother had given me and the loaf of stale bread that Tulek had pushed into my hands at the train station. One of the women had sprinkled a few grains of sugar on the bread for me, and I was busy hunting down every last sugar grain. Then I heard my name.

"Stepping over bodies and around them, I followed Tulek's voice until I found myself in his arms. He pulled me down under the train with him, and we crawled along in the thick darkness to the seventh car, where Tulek had boarded. Before we climbed in, he took a moment to fill his hat with snow, so that we'd have some clean water to drink.

"The women's car was detached and sent to its fate, while we traveled on. We were taken to a camp. The first thing we saw was a group of men in striped uniforms, shoveling snow. We asked them where we were; in reply, they drew their forefingers across their throats."

This was Buchenwald, the site of Rav Lau's ninth Holocaust memory:

BLOCK 52

"At Buchenwald, the gold watch Mama had given Tulek was used to bribe one of the German wardens to ignore my presence. A Czech doctor saved my life by injecting me with only a half-dose of the vaccination he gave to all the men. Through a series of miracles and with the help of many good people, I passed through all the selektzias.

"I feel amazed when I contemplate the chain of miracles that happened to me."

"Often, when I think of the war, I feel amazed when I contemplate the chain of miracles

that happened to me.

"After the injections, we were taken to a tunnel equipped with a row of showerheads. By 1945, everybody knew what to expect from showerheads in a Nazi camp, and we prepared to die a miserable death. One of the men in our group suddenly fell down dead. Ever since we left the Piotrkow ghetto, he'd been keeping a cyanide capsule hidden under a temporary filling in his tooth, and he'd decided this was the moment to use it. But the showerheads were turned on, and ice cold water sprayed out. I don't know how to describe the life-giving warmth we felt from that icy water.

"Next, we were given our prison uniforms and had our numbers tattooed on our arms. Naftali was number 117029; I was number 117030. Then we entered Block 52.

"It was a shocking sight, even to me. The occupants numbered about 2,000, most of them 'musselmen' who had lost all hope. They'd become accustomed to relieving themselves right there in the barracks, and the stench was unbearable.

"I waited in Block 52 for two days for my brother, who had been hitched along with three other prisoners to a wagon (agalah in Hebrew) hauling corpses to the crematorium. For years afterwards, I thought that the phrase we say in Kaddish, 'b'agalah uv'zman kariv,' was referring to those wagons.

"On the third day, I was moved to Block Eight, where the conditions were comparatively good. My brother had cautioned me not to say I was Jewish.

One of the Russian prisoners, Fyodor, stole some potatoes and cooked up a soup for me, and he sewed an earmuff for me, too. Meanwhile, my brother was looking worse every time I saw him, but now I was in a position to do something for him sometimes, like smuggling him a slice of bread with margarine."

TULEK IS TAKEN AWAY

By early April, 1945, rumors had reached the prisoners that Germany was losing the war. But before the hoped-for liberation came about, the brothers, Tulek and Lulek, were separated. Rav Lau's tenth memory:

"Tulek came to me and said, 'They're taking me away. I see no way out of this Gehinnom. This is the end of the world.' He spoke for only a minute or two, but every word he said is engraved on my heart. 'You're going to be left alone now,' he said. 'But you still have friends. Maybe a miracle will happen and you'll survive. I just wanted to tell you: There's a place called Eretz Yisrael. Repeat after me: Eretz Yisrael.'

"I repeated the words, which meant nothing to me. 'Eretz Yisrael is the home of the Jews,' Naftali explained. 'It's the only place in the world where they don't kill us. If you survive, there will be people who will want to take you to live with them, because you're a cute little boy. You're not going anyplace. Only to Eretz Yisrael. We have an uncle there. Say that you're Rabbi Lau's son, and tell them to find your uncle. Goodbye, Lulek.

"That day, Naftali was put on a train. He managed to jump out the window of the building he was brought to, but after five days he was caught and put on another train. This time he jumped out of the moving train, and came back to Buchenwald. With supernatural strength, he crawled into the camp, and then he collapsed. He hadn't forgotten our father and the promise he had made to him, or the sound of our mother's voice shouting, 'Take care of Lulek!' On April 11th, he was put into quarantine. On that same day, American planes flew low over Buchenwald and he survived.

"Not a day in my life goes by without my thinking of Naftali. He was given a mission: to save my life. And he carried it out."

THE SUITCASE

There is one final image. This picture isn't in the collection of agonizing Holocaust scenes stored in Rav Lau's memory. This picture is framed and hung on the wall for all to see as they enter his home. It's the famous photograph of a smiling, eight-year-old Lulek, a coat draped over one arm, the other holding a suitcase.

"An American soldier donated an old suitcase to me from the army surplus storehouse. It went with me to Eretz Yisrael, and it held everything I owned, as I wandered from one educational institution to another. By the time I got married, it was so shabby that my wife wanted to throw it out, but I refused to part with it. 'This was my house,' I told her. 'If our children ever complain, I'll show it to them and say, "This is what your father had when he was a boy." I put it up in the storage loft of our building, and when we moved to another apartment, I came back for it. I climbed seventy-five steps to retrieve it, but I found nothing there but the handle. The suitcase had disintegrated.



"But I have the photo. Elie Wiesel, who was with me in Buchenwald, presented it to me at a Bundist event; he'd spotted it in a museum in Vancouver. It came as a complete surprise to me. As soon as the children saw it, they all said, 'There's the suitcase!'

"When I leave my house every day, on one side of the door is the mezuzah; on the other side is this photograph. Each time I see it, it says the same thing to me: 'Yisrael, look at Lulek. Now your task is to justify the fact that you were saved. You must carry out your parents' mission; you must keep the chain unbroken. This is from whence you came.'

"And across from the photo, the mezuzah tells me 'before Whom I'm destined to give an accounting.'"