

A Passover Miracle

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The holiday of Passover commemorates a time when the Jewish people were saved from the hands of the Egyptians some 3500 years ago. But the Passover that took place in April 1944 was the cause of a lesser known miracle for one Jewish family in the town of Kosice.

During WWII, in the Nazi-occupied countries, most Jews were unable to escape the Nazis' machinery of death and destruction. For those few Jews who did miraculously escape, the majority attribute it to chance, to luck, or perhaps to divine intervention. Yet there are stories of rescue, perhaps only a very few, where a logic, a pattern of action and consequence is very much apparent.

This is one of those rare stories:

Aaron Lorber was part of a family of five, living in Kosice, a town located in eastern Czechoslovakia (or eastern Hungary, depending on the era). During WWII, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, Kosice was part of Hungary, having been handed over by its ally, Nazi Germany. Moshe Lorber, Aaron's father, was involved in the family business, a prosperous sawmill located in Kosice. The business employed some 100 workers from the region.

Until 1944, Hungary's Jews fared better than the rest of Europe's Jews. Despite the increase in anti-Semitic acts, Hungary's Jews were spared the worst excesses of Nazi occupation. But on March 19, 1944, when the Nazis physically occupied Hungary and took over direct control of the country, all this changed. Within weeks, the ghettoization and deportation of Hungarian Jews to the death camps in Poland was being organized — and Kosice was first on the list.

On the Sunday following Pesach, rumors circulated that the Lorbers' neighborhood was to be evacuated next. Upon hearing the news, Aaron's mother, Esther Lorber, started packing; Moshe Lorber went outside to fetch his bicycle.

"Where are you going?" his wife asked.

"To pay the workers — it's Sunday, their regular payday," he replied calmly.

"But what if we are separated? What if we are evacuated before you come back?" she pleaded.

"They worked for their money and I am going to pay them," he answered. "I don't want anyone to ever say that a Jew ran away with their money," he continued. "Don't worry; if we don't meet here, I'll meet you at the place where we are being gathered."

Moshe Lorber reached the factory where a long line of workers patiently awaited him. But two men seemed to be lingering, purposely not proceeding to the front of the line. Moshe feared the worst. Perhaps they had an old score to settle. Finally, the rest of the line was finished, and the two men approached him.

“We have decided to save you,” said Mr. Biak, one of the workers. "My friend here, Mr. Oravec, will take you in because his house is on the outskirts of town. They are much less likely to look for you there. But you must hurry!”

Mr. Oravec immediately rushed back to the house to collect the Lorber family. A few hours later, Mr. Biak led Moshe and Esther Lorber to the Oravec home, avoiding the rush of panicked Jews hastily heading toward the evacuation location.

The Oravec family of five lived in a humble, two-room house (neither room larger than seven by three meters), without running water, toilet facilities, a separate kitchen area or basement. To this they welcomed five members of the Lorber family: Moshe and Esther, and their three children, Aaron, Tibi and Yehudit (barely 4 years of age at the time), plus three others — Moshe’s sister Bertha, his brother-in-law, Leib, and their son, Kalman. The Oravec’s moved their entire family into one room, while their eight guests occupied the other.



Nine cramped and starving months later, the Soviet troops reached Kosice. For the first time since the day they fled their home in Kosice, the hidden Jewish family gazed at the sun in the blue sky and breathed fresh air. ‘The fresh air tasted like whiskey’, Aaron remembers, only 15 years of age at the time.

Is that the whole story? We have barely scratched the surface. There were countless other brushes with danger before and even after their liberation. Yet, events conspired to save the family from discovery and execution. Each miraculous time!

There was the day Moshe and his wife were fleeing their Kosice home when a gypsy woman led Moshe and his wife down a secret alley away from a suspicious Hungarian policeman guarding escape routes out of the city.

Aaron remembers the day another Hungarian policeman, perhaps acting on a tip, arrived in the Oravec household demanding the door be opened to the second room — the one in which the Lorbers hid. Told the locked room belonged to the daughter, who was at the market with the key, the policeman dragged Mr. Oravec's wife off in search of the daughter, and then suddenly lost interest, releasing her without further investigation.

And he will never forget the evening when Mr. Oravec, filled with a little too much to drink, started yelling in the streets, “I like Jews! I have no problem with Jews! Why do people cause them so much trouble??”

On yet another night a friend of Mr. Oravec, a Ukrainian Nazi, accompanied him home. The two spent the night drinking, all the while the soldier asking Mr. Oravec to take him into the other room. A short time later, the same soldier returned, broke down the door — but saw nothing. Weeks earlier, Moshe had instructed Mr. Oravec to bring wood from the lumber mill with which he built a fake wall, and behind which he made room for a hidden passageway, less than one foot wide. The panicked family was squeezed into this space as the soldier’s eyes scanned the room. One knock on the wall would have revealed that it was hollow, and led to their discovery.

Then there was the harrowing morning when one of the neighbors saw Moshe in the Oravec kitchen, and reported the discovery to his wife. She said, “You think I didn’t know. Keep your mouth shut — it’s no one else’s business!”

And once, Hungarian collaborators accused Mr. Biak of hiding the Lorbers. He was beaten and tortured, but brave and loyal Mr. Biak did not divulge a word!.

Finally there came the day of liberation! That same day the Lorbers returned to their old home. Their landlady, whom, in their absence, had moved into their home, welcomed them back and immediately began to cook for them. At that time, Russian soldiers were roaming the city in search of booty. Two drunken soldiers barged into the room where the Lorbers were standing. They whispered to each other, and then one asked the other whether anyone knew the time. Aaron, proud of the Bar Mitzvah watch he was still wearing, immediately responded with the exact time. His father grimaced, and Aaron immediately realized his mistake. He ran to the kitchen and threw his watch into a pile of vegetable peelings. But the Russian soldiers were onto him.

They ran into the kitchen after him, demanding the watch. When the fifteen-year-old boy denied having one, one of the soldiers began frisking Aaron up and down. He jammed his finger into the boy’s shirt pocket, and cried out angrily as he pulled his fingers out, one of which was now bleeding profusely. (Aaron, an aspiring artist, always kept a razor in his pocket to sharpen his drawing tools.) The enraged soldier dragged Aaron out of the kitchen toward the front door, pointing a gun at his head, a grim signal of the execution he was planning for the boy. Only the intervention of his fellow soldier — and the landlady, who offered him whiskey, bandages and a few soft words — kept the soldier from shooting the young lad. As it was, the two defenders had to drag the still-threatening soldier out of the house, away from the boy.

These and many other miraculous escapes happened. Yet we still have not addressed the central question of this tale, which is in fact the very essence of the whole story: Why did Mr. Biak and Mr. Oravec risk their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, to save the Lorber family? The question was answered by Mr. Biak one Sunday when he came to visit the hiding family.

“We saved you because you always treated us with respect,” he said that Sunday afternoon. (In addition to working at the factory, Mr. Biak would occasionally do odd jobs around the Lorber home.) “My mother never looked down on any one. She was respectful to all,” Aaron confirmed.

“And you always paid your workers on time. Not only that, you would give us advances whenever we asked ,” he continued, as Mr. Oravec nodded.

“The week before the evacuation order was issued, you were especially nice to us. Do you remember? We came to your home asking for an advance, and you, Moshe, answered the door. You apologized, saying it was not possible, it being your Jewish holiday when you could not touch money. (It was during the first days of Pesach.) Just then your wife came to the door, and joined the conversation.”

“Moshe,” she insisted, “there’s no problem. Just take them to the safe, open it up and let them take out the money.” You agreed, and we were able to receive our advance.”

“We were very moved by this gesture. It impressed us so much that you were even willing to interrupt your holy day to help us. And that is why we decided to help you.”

Why must we tell these stories? So that we remember that even in the “Kingdom of Night,” there lived exceptional human beings who followed their conscience, people who defied the Nazi evil and the complicity and silence of their own neighbors. These individuals, it has been noted, saved not only Jews, but the very reputation of humanity. And we tell these stories, perhaps, because it reveals to us that — at least some of the time — the universe seems to be unfolding as it should.

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