

Amir Haskel

The Warden of Block 11

Contenido de Semrik

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Amir Haskel
Yavne, 2014

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Questions

Brigadier General (res.) Amir Haskel, a pilot in the Israeli Air Force and a researcher of the Holocaust, followed the amazing life story of Yakov Kozalchik, step by step. With the thoroughness of a historical detective, he portrays in this book the life of an extraordinary person, even within the unbelievable context of the fate of European Jews in World War II. Throughout the investigation - in Israel, Poland, and Germany - Haskel encounters a growing number of surprises. Ultimately their outcomes lead him to erect a tombstone on the grave of the man he had never met.

Who was Yakov Kozalchik? The quest indicates that he was born in 1902 in Krynki, a small town in northeast Poland. In his youth he was already called "Shimshon Eizen," (Iron Samson) due to his physical dimensions and outstanding strength. On the eve of WWII, he returned to Poland after having lived in Cuba and the US for eleven years. Eventually he arrived in Auschwitz in January 1943 and was sentenced to Block 11. This was a secret compartmentalized bunker-

block, the terror of the camp's inmates, within a place that itself was the most terrible place on earth. In this bunker those sentenced to hanging and death by gunshot were held as well.

Yakov quickly became the chief warden of the block. Witnesses claimed that he was an omnipotent prisoner. His role also required him to serve as a hangman. Nonetheless, he risked his life to help, to the best of his ability, those inmates thrown into the bunker's cells. Very many owed – and still owe – their lives to him. However, there were those who bore witness against him.

Yakov survived the Holocaust. In 1946 he arrived in Palestine as an illegal immigrant. Here he continued to perform and to show off his strength before audiences. However life in the Jewish State was not easy for him. The governments of Poland and Czechoslovakia requested his extradition. There were also Jews and Poles who gave fairly vague testimonies that were held against him.

Yakov died in 1953 of a broken heart. At the time, bitter arguments were raging in Israel between those who called for the prosecution of anyone who had served as a “kapo” in the camps and those who asked that the phenomenon be perceived in its context. Yakov Kozalchik was only 51 years old at his death. Until 2005, no tombstone was erected on his grave.

Who was Yakov Kozalchik? What was he doing in Block 11, at Auschwitz? Why did the governments of Poland and Czechoslovakia request his extradition? Why was no tombstone erected? And what was the connection formed

between a Jewish warden in Auschwitz and an Israeli Air Force pilot, nearly 70 years later? These are the main questions of this book.

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The Hangman Who Didn't Want to Do His Job

On the morning of August 10, 1944, a hot and humid day, a prisoner was led to the gallows at the Auschwitz death camp. He was a handsome blue-eyed man, and he held his head high. Although his hands were bound behind his back and the rope dangled before his eyes, his features remained calm and quiet. He seemed to have made his peace with the fate that awaited him. The camp inmates, ravenous skeletons wearing striped prisoner garb stiff with dirt and sweat, were forced to stand at roll call and watch the execution.

The roll call square was hushed. The atmosphere was very tense as the steps of the condemned man and the hangman resounded loudly. Peacefully, offering no resistance, the prisoner climbed onto the platform. An SS officer wearing a black uniform and shiny boots read the sentence in a stern voice. The noose was placed around the neck of the

wretched man. The lever was activated, the rope stretched, but... nothing happened. Seeming not to have withstood the pressure, the rope tore. The condemned man fell back onto the platform, but remained upright. Cries of joy were heard from the watching inmates. The SS men and the camp commander were embarrassed and confused.

Who was the prisoner? Who was the hangman? How and why did the rope tear?

Nicholas Engel was born on January 14, 1916, the third son of a Jewish family, in Warinie, Slovakia. In 1937–1938, he was conscripted into the Slovakian army and served as an officer with the rank of first lieutenant in the infantry. In 1939 he married Alice, a fellow Slovakian Jew. When the war broke out, Engel was called up for duty in the reserves but then discharged in January 1940 because he was Jewish.

In 1942, Engel, his wife, and mother-in-law fled to Budapest, where they were arrested. On July 18, 1942, the three were sent on a transport of Slovakian Jews to Auschwitz. Of the entire transport, 327 men and 178 women were assigned to work in the camp. The rest were destined for extermination in the gas chambers.¹ Engel's prisoner number was 48549. He himself thought of it as a temporary mark. He had no intention of remaining a prisoner at the camp. Indeed, it was not long before he attempted to escape, was caught and sent to the Libiaz camp near Auschwitz.

At this camp he worked in forced labor at a nearby coalmine. Alice, Engel's wife, was sent to Birkenau in the

¹ Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, p. 199.

summer of 1942. As one of the “selections,” she was found unfit for work and sent to her death in the gas chambers. Engel tried to escape from the Libiaz camp as well, but was caught once again and sent to Block 11, the “death block” at Auschwitz 1.

Engel, a stubborn young man, resolved to escape Auschwitz 1 as well. He asked an inmate in the block to obtain two sets of clothes for him. At that time, civilian clothes were stored in the block attic. On July 14, 1944, when he was sent with two other inmates for a coffee pot, the three took the opportunity and fled. However, their attempt was in vain. They were caught four days later and reinterred in Block 11. This time they were thrown into a cell with two Polish prisoners. One was Boleslaw Staron, and the other Edward Galinski, whom we will meet again. This time Engel was sentenced to death by hanging.

This is where Yakov Kozalchik, a Jewish prisoner who worked in Block 11 as a prison guard and hangman, enters the scene. He took a liking to Nikolaus Engel. He even described him in his memoirs: “He was a real man. He had fearless blue eyes. He behaved like a soldier and treated his captors from the Storm Troops with quiet contempt. I liked him. I wanted to help him escape.”

However Kozalchik’s ability to help in such a complicated and final situation was very limited. It demanded a great deal of creativity and courage. Kozalchik further related: “I was at a loss. I went to the Jewish leaders at the camp and asked for their advice. They told me: ‘Rudy (Kozalchik), this man can’t be saved. He has been sentenced to death. If you

try to get involved, you will be risking your own life. And you are the only person here who can help us a little. This man must go to his death, and you must do as you were ordered and hang him.”

But Kozalchik was determined to save Engel. He had an idea: he would use a razor that he had hidden among his clothes for an emergency or to commit suicide. He relates: “A short time before the hanging, I took out the razor and cut the two edges of the rope as much as necessary. When I fitted the rope around his neck and pulled the lever that opened the floor hatch, Engel’s body slid down. However, rather than breaking his neck, the rope tore. The Germans took him to another camp. They wanted to hang me instead. A friend, an SS commander, saved my life. He insisted that the rope was to blame, not I.”

Kozalchik demanded that he be allowed to try another section of the same rope. But when doing so, he used a particularly heavy iron bar that severed the end of the rope. Then he claimed that this proved his innocence, as the rope “was rotten.”²

The story of this incident and of Engel’s fate was eventually related by Polish inmate Boleslaw Staron, Engel’s cellmate: “One day we heard voices and knocks outside. We knew that the Germans were installing gallows in the execution yard. Our nerves were on edge. We did not know who was to be executed. We decided to take leave of each other and

² I.F. Stone, *Underground to Palestine*, pp. 136–138.

we did so. A short while later, Engel was taken from the cell. Edek³ and I remained.”

“After a while, we heard loud yells and prisoners screaming. It seemed that they were being taken outside and forced to watch the execution. Suddenly everything was quiet. The silence lasted several minutes. Then we heard the steps of several people approaching our cell. It was the wardens. They had Engel. They threw him into the cell like a sack of potatoes, his neck bleeding and swollen.”

“The swelling was a result of the rope that had become entwined around his neck when he was hung on the gallows, but the rope had torn under his weight. I consoled Engel and told him that according to international law in such cases, the prisoner should be pardoned. However our joy did not last long. The wardens returned for Engel and that same day he was taken to Birkenau. He was murdered there.”⁴

And what happened to Kozalchik, the hangman who did not want to do his job? Inmate Jerry Adam Abrondhuban, who witnessed the failed hanging, said that at its conclusion Kozalchik was beaten in punishment.⁵

This book will tell the life story of Yakov Kozalchik, the warden of Block 11 at Auschwitz, the hangman who did not want to do his job.

³ Edek – Nickname of Edward Galinski who was being held in the same cell.

⁴ Adam Cyra, *Pozostat Po Nich Slad*, pp. 32-33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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From Flying Planes to Guiding Groups in Poland

I was born in Israel in 1953. I was not raised by Holocaust survivors. I'm married to Aliza, and I have four children and four grandchildren (at last count). I'm a brigadier general (res.) in the Israeli Air Force, trained as a pilot.

In September 2003, I retired after 32 years in the service. In my last post as Chief Human Resources Officer in the force, I had instigated the Witnesses in Uniform project, IDF trips to Poland, together with Major General Elazar Stern, then the Chief Education Officer.

In August 2001, I had the honor of heading the first delegation. It consisted of 180 officers from all forces of the IDF. During the five-day tour of Poland, we visited Warsaw, Tykocin, Lublin, and Krakow, and we were also exposed to the remnants of this country's Jewish history, spanning one thousand years. We visited the camps at Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Birkenau, and stood shocked at

places where millions of our people had died. We also saw sites where the once-pervasive Jewish culture had been reduced to ashes.

This trip to Poland was to become one of the most significant events in my life. It also determined the course I was to take after retiring from the army. Several days after returning from Poland, once my emotional turmoil had calmed, I decided that I wished to expand my knowledge of and acquaintance with the Holocaust. I followed the Witnesses in Uniform project until my retirement, and upon retiring I decided to join a course training guides to Poland, sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Education and Yad Vashem, the World Center for Holocaust Research. The lectures I heard and the books I read only increased my thirst and my desire to enhance and expand my knowledge of this era.

My work with the delegations began as a youth group guide. I was glad when in December 2004, Yad Vashem asked me to begin guiding IDF delegations. I have always done my best to be a practical person, but my new role demanded that I delve into the research literature and witness testimonies. The trips to Poland, alongside my personal inquisitiveness and maybe also fate, have given me the opportunity to take part in several fascinating projects over the last few years. One of these is my work reconstructing the life story of Yakov Kozalchik, the warden of Block 11 at Auschwitz.

It all began in June 2004. Every evening I would access the website intended for guides to Poland. One of the guides