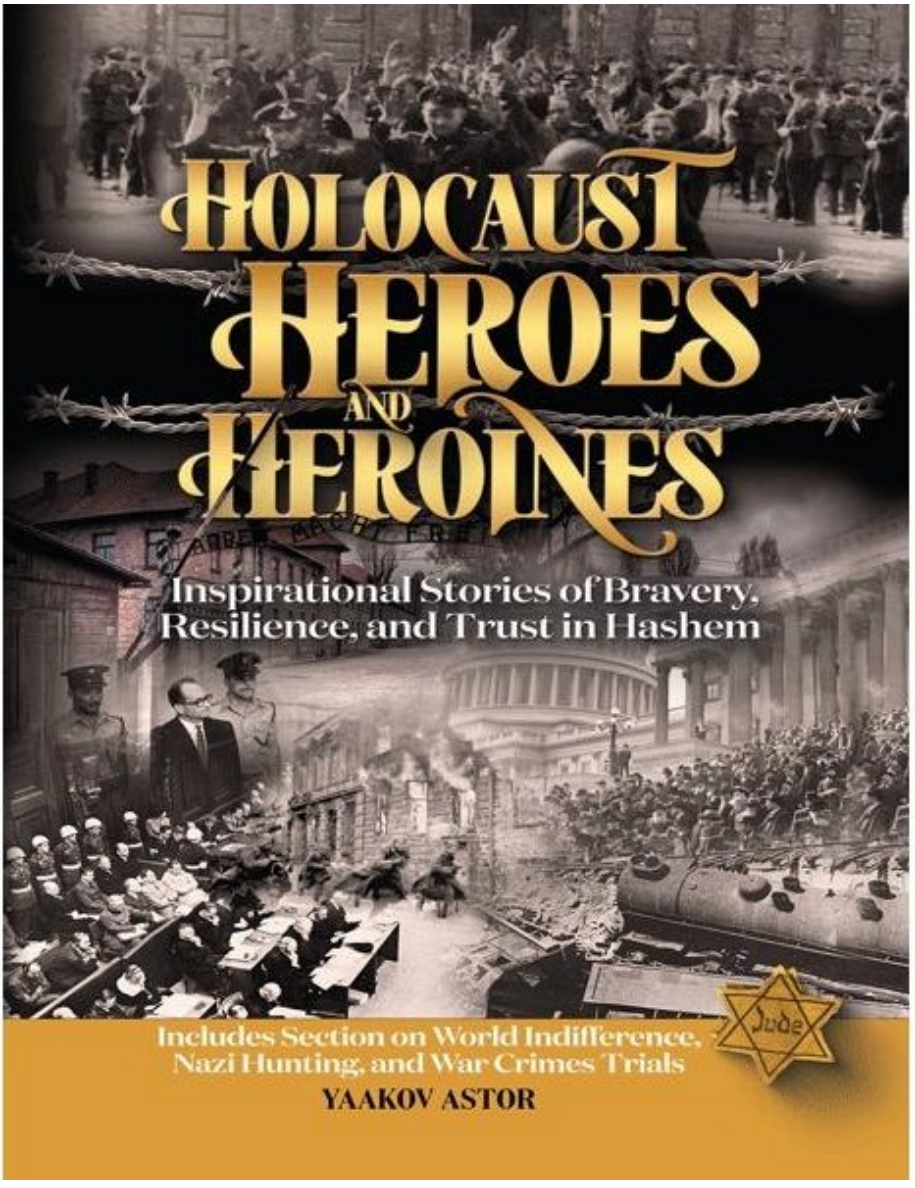


A free excerpt — the Introduction

from Holocaust Heroes and Heroines by Yaakov Astor.

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The complete book is available from Israel Bookshop Publications and on Amazon.

Introduction

Opportunity of a Lifetime

In 2003, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime – to work closely with Rabbi Joseph Elias *zt"l* to produce a Holocaust curriculum for Torah Umesorah, the umbrella organization that serves the educational needs of hundreds of yeshivos, Bais Yaakovs, and Jewish day schools across America. Rabbi Elias was one of the most distinguished pioneer figures of postwar Torah education in America. He not only built Breuer's High School in Washington Heights, one of the earliest schools for girls in America, but was at the forefront of creating Jewish publications for the Torah world, beginning with an English-language monthly he founded during the Second World War. Rabbi Nosson Scherman, editor of ArtScroll, told me that he considered Rabbi Elias his mentor as an editor.

It was certainly an honor just to be asked to meet with him. The honor turned into a year-and-a-half apprenticeship. Once a week, I would sit with him in his living room and hammer out a curriculum on the Holocaust true to the values of Torah.

Rabbi Elias explained to me that the Holocaust had been hijacked by those with ideologies ignorant of or belligerent toward Torah tradition. Even otherwise innocent-looking books or displays in

Holocaust museums could be problematic. At best, they failed to convey a Torah perspective, and at worst, they would try to inculcate readers and viewers with an anti-Torah perspective. The goal of the curriculum we were to work on was to reclaim the meaning of the Holocaust.

Much happened after my apprenticeship ended. It took almost a decade for part of the work to see the light of publication, which became the book *Tragedy & Rebirth*, published by ArtScroll. That book offers an excellent overview of the Holocaust and serves as a primer for Holocaust educators and interested lay people. Its strength is in what it does not say. There is so much to say on the Holocaust that people – teachers, students, and lay people – easily get overwhelmed. I felt pride when a master educator told me that the greatness of the book was that it condensed the major aspects into an easily followed and readable format.

Be that as it may, the book represented only the tip of the iceberg of what I absorbed from my time in the presence of such a special scholar, human being, and Jew as Rabbi Elias, and what I have learned since. This book, the one you hold in your hands, is an attempt to mine more of the wealth of teachings, thoughts, and insights emanating from my apprenticeship and that were barely tapped in *Tragedy & Rebirth*.

The ZYO Fellowships

My work with Rabbi Elias represented the last great project of his life – an organization he called Zechor Yemos Olam (ZYO), which is Torah Umesorah's Holocaust education program. After he retired, Rabbi Shalom Friedman took over. He conceived of and acquired grant money for the ZYO Fellowships. These began as a ten-month course (shortened eventually to a six-month course) based on the curriculum I helped Rabbi Elias develop. ZYO offered the course to leading *mechanchim* and *mechanchos* in the US and the UK to help them teach a new generation of Jews about the Holocaust in line with Torah values.

At the end of the course, the participants were treated to an all-expenses-paid trip to Poland to visit the sites of the Holocaust they had studied. Between 2010 and 2016, I participated in all six of the Zechor Yemos Olam trips to Poland (after 2016, funding for the program dried up). During that time, ZYO graduated more than 120 master teachers, who spread their heightened knowledge of the Holocaust and its Torah principles to schools across the US and the UK.

The annual Poland trips sharpened my own understanding of the Holocaust and how to teach it. One of the most important things driven home to me was the importance of telling the Holocaust through stories. The most inspirational stories needed no embellishment. They taught things like the incredible resilience of everyday Jews in the face of impossible odds, the courage to perform mitzvos under the worst circumstances, the selflessness to risk their lives to perform *chessed* for others in even more need, and much more.

This book contains a small sampling of those stories. They were chosen for their authenticity and ability to inspire – to produce a "higher fire."

I Tried to Hear the Voices

In concluding the introduction I want to share one of the most remarkable and moving pieces I have ever read about the Holocaust. It was penned by one of the Fellowship students. Each student was a gem of a person and Torah educator and added considerably to my knowledge of the Holocaust. But among all the "homework" assignments I reviewed, this one stands out. It speaks for itself but let me provide a little background.

Rabbi Shmuel Klein, currently Torah Umesorah's Director of Publications and Communications, took over as Director of the Fellowships after Rabbi Friedman. He would be the first to speak to the group once we landed in Poland and settled down. Standing in the Nozyk shul, Warsaw's only surviving prewar synagogue, his voice

echoed as he shared a profound thought about the concept of *shtikah*, "silence."

"*Shtikah* does not stem from a concealment of words," he explained. "Words expressed by the mouth are but sounds that emanate from a deeper reality. To hear them, we must be quiet; we have to quiet our souls and become experts in silence. Someone with a developed capacity for silence can hear the sounds of the magnificent world that was once Jewish Poland – the voices of young *bachurim* arguing a *Tosafos* in one of the many yeshivos in Warsaw; the cries of prayers emanating from its more than 400 prewar shuls and *shteiblach*; the everyday speech of Jews discussing a fine point of Jewish law as they wait for a trolley; the buzz of the *umschlagplatz*, the train station, full of chassidim going to their rebbes.

"The vibrant Jewish life of Poland is deathly silent. Yet, beneath the din of car horns and street traffic it is possible to hear the voices of the past. Their hushed echoes reverberate loudly in ears tuned to a higher frequency."

One particularly sensitive *mechaneches* struggled with her challenge to "hear the voices." At the end of the trip, she shared something she wrote about that struggle. To me, it is one of the most moving writings I have ever read.

> *I tried to hear the voices… The whole trip, I tried to hear the voices.*
>
> *I tried when we were in the* chatzer *of Gur. I tried to picture this building as it was, not as it is. I tried to feel the throngs of eager chassidim rushing toward their rebbe, listening to his sage advice. I tried… but it was hard to imagine it.*
>
> *I tried to hear them in the Yeshivah Chachmei Lublin. The best of the best would come here to learn. I tried to hear Rav Meir Shapiro's voice – grand orator that he was, guiding the Jews of his time. I tried to picture the opening day of this beautiful edifice with all the joy and excitement that it deserved. I tried… but the voices were too faint.*

I tried to hear them in the [beautifully renovated] shul in Lancet. I tried to hear them in the beis hakevaros *of the great tzaddikim in Lizhensk and Lublin and in Sanz. I tried to hear them in the Rema shul and the Nozyk shul and in all the museum shuls too. The buildings are there – but the people are gone. Gone… gone… gone…*

I tried in the Bais Yaakov Seminary, where I thought it would be easy. I did see the images in my mind – the pictures of happy Bais Yaakov girls, posing for the camera, laughing and singing in their camps. I saw them learning and studying for tests and whispering secrets to each other. I saw them – but sadly, even there – I could not hear them.

But then we came to Birkenau. And the voices were loud, SO LOUD. I tried to block them out. The harsh yelling of the Gestapo. The roll call. The shots of guns and the barking of dogs. I heard the desperate voices of the mothers, begging, pleading. I heard the confused voices of the children, the dirty, starving children. I heard them crying. And I cried with them. How I cried…

And then, through my tears, I heard them. I finally heard them. A beautiful chorus of the voices that had been eluding me all week. I heard them speaking to me, comforting me. "Don't look for us here," they said. "Poland is just a shell. Go home. Listen to us by the tishin *of Gur and Sanz and Aleksander and Satmar and Bobov and Belz. Listen to the chassidim singing. Listen to the rebbe directing his flock. Then you will hear us. We are there.*

"Listen to us in your yeshivos – in Ponevezh and Mir and Brisk and Lakewood. Listen to them argue out a Tosafos. Listen to them engage in discussions and svaros. *You are hearing us speak.*

"Go to your Bais Yaakov. Stand by the entrance to the building when the girls come in for a day of Torah'dik *education. Listen to how they talk to each other about topics big and small. Listen with your heart. Those are our voices."*

I come home and hug my children. I hold on to them tightly. In the background, I hear the voices… welcoming me home.



I take my child to the dentist and I think of all the gold teeth extracted.

I take my child for shoes and I think of piles of shoes confiscated, in all sizes and styles, sweet little toddler shoes, sturdy men's shoes and dainty ladies' shoes.

I label my son's suitcases for camp and I think of labeled suitcases on the way to a very different kind of camp.

And the piles of hair and brushes that jump into my consciousness as I stroke my daughter's hair.

All these items are the stuff of life which the resha'im *snuffed out.*

How do we go on? We live life to its fullest, take care of those dear to us and reach out to those who need our help. The Nazis tried to make everything cold and scientific, we respond with warmth and love to our families and students.

When I looked at the children's shoes in Auschwitz, I thought, "How will I ever buy shoes for my children again?" Dina, standing next to me, so wisely responded, "Go buy your children shoes, with an extra dose of love."