

Purim in the times of occupation – how tradition was humiliated

An important element of the anti-Semitic policy of the German occupiers was the harassment during the Jewish holidays, calculated to ridicule the centuries-old tradition and humiliate those who deemed it important.

In the Jewish tradition, the holiday of Purim (Fate) is celebrated as a true festival of joy. All fasting is forbidden, joy and feasts rich in food and wine are obligatory. Children and the poor are given gifts. Antics, jokes or even small pranks are welcome and considered tasteful.

This joyous celebration usually falls on the fourteenth day of the month of adar (in Poland in February or March) and commemorates the rescue of the Jews from extermination that threatened them at the hands of the servants of the Persian king. The whole story is described in the biblical Book of Esther. The titular character is a wise and beautiful queen, the wife of a Persian ruler. It was she who thwarted the murderous plans of Haman, the all-powerful royal minister who planned to exterminate all the Jews in the land exactly on 14th day of the month of adar. During the feast, Esther exposed Haman's lies, showing the king that his deceitful minister was the real threat, not the Jews. Haman died, and his figure – in Jewish tradition – became one of the symbols of evil and misfortune.

During World War II, one important element of the German occupiers' anti-Semitic policy was to plan particularly aggressive or humiliating actions during the Jewish holidays. This was calculated to tarnish centuries of tradition and humiliate those for whom it was important. The holiday of Purim, with its joyful atmosphere and hopeful message, was the "perfect" choice for such activities. Rabbi Shimon Huberband, a collaborator of "Oneg Shabbat", wrote about what it was like in 1940: "The situation is terrible. There is no joyful Purim atmosphere, only the mournful mood of Tisha b'Av [the holiday commemorating the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple]."

People take comfort in the fact that spring is approaching – and by spring the decision will have to be made and everyone will be saved. During the reading of the Book of Esther, in all the minyan [a group of at least 10 men aged 13 and over required to say prayers], less money was collected for gifts for the poor. The obtained amount does not meet the needs. [...] A thing worth noting: Poles today accosted and beat Jews in various streets of the city. It is even said that it is a German job, because attacks on Jews by Poles are photographed by Germans. Later they will show the world that Poles attack Jews. It is only sad that there are Poles who let themselves be used by them and by becoming a toy in their hands they serve foreign purposes. Even sadder is the fact that there are no Poles who would influence these rascals to stop their dirty work” (Ringelblum Archive vol. 32, Warsaw 2017, pp. 49-50). The events referred to by Rabbi Huberband have gone down in history as the “Easter Pogrom”.

Over time, the actions of the occupants became more and more cruel. The underground newspaper published in Yiddish – “Jedies” – News recorded such an event in Zduńska Wola on the holiday of Purim on 3 March 1942: “Ten Jews between the ages of 30 and 60 were hanged. The execution was carried out by Jewish policemen. The chairman of the Judenrat was forced by the Nazi bloodhounds to give a speech addressed to the Jews in attendance. German students and their teachers also came to watch the show. And all this to introduce them to the extermination of Jews. The martyrs hung in the town square all day. Then the chevra kadisha [funeral brotherhood] buried them in a common grave. The bodies lay one on top of the other” (Ringelblum Archive, Warsaw 2015, vol. 19, p. 182).

The gloomy spectacles staged by the occupiers, which were supposed to tarnish the heritage of Judaism both for Germans and Poles, and finally for Jews themselves, could not change the fact that even in such a predicament people fought to preserve normality and respect for tradition. Traces of such actions can be found in the documents of the Warsaw Jewish Council – Judenrat: “On 3 March 1942, there was a >>Purimah<< party for children – the employees of the Department, organised by the Human Resources Department of the Health Department. During the party, the following gifts were distributed to the children: 120 pieces of toilet soap, 120 bags of candy, 120 bags of gingerbread” (Ringelblum Archive, 2014, p. 599). This seemingly innocent children’s game represented a struggle for dignity similar to that of Mordechai, one of the main

characters in the Book of Esther. Just like the biblical hero, the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto overcame the adversity, although only a handful of them were able to celebrate Purim.

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Publication

date: 2021-02-27

Print date: 2022-11-13 13:56

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/purim-in-the-times-of-occupation-how-tradition-was-humiliated/>