

Sukkot in the Warsaw Ghetto

“In our shop, worries of another type. We have no Esrog and Lulav and will not be able to fulfil the commandment and blessing. We waited until the last minute sure that he would arrive...”

(Feldshuh p. 483 – FELDSZUH-6-C. 00485)

The Jewish holiday of Sukkos, also known as the festival of “booths” or tabernacles, has its own unique set of customs and laws. The festival falls five days after Yom Kippur in late September or October. The two primary obligations are to eat and sleep in a sukka, and to say a blessing while holding the four species of plant.

A sukka is a temporary hut or booth, with a roof made from some type of branches or vegetation, that becomes the home for the seven days of the festival.

The four species are very specific, consisting of an “esrog” citrus fruit, a “lulav” palm branch, myrtle branches and sticks of willow. The four elements are held together while a blessing is recited.

Throughout the period of the German occupation of Warsaw, fulfilling even the most basic Jewish religious obligations and traditions was extremely difficult, if not impossible. Notwithstanding, religious Jews went to extraordinary lengths and took great risks in attempting to fulfil their obligations, which were essentially forbidden by the occupying forces.

The sukka is rather obvious, and generally, highly visible. This in itself was dangerous and in the ghetto, period was often disguised or erected in a hidden location. Even more challenging was acquiring the four species, two of which are not native to Poland or Northern Europe, and are imported from Middle-Eastern or Mediterranean countries.

According to Rabbi Shimon Huberband, immediately after a cease-fire had begun on the eve of Sukkos 1939, Warsaw Jews began to build a sukka in every courtyard. He states that some buildings in Nalewki St. housed several sukkas, and that due to the shortage of food, everyone was only able to eat the minimum amount of bread in the sukka.

Regarding the four species he wrote that there were esrogim in Warsaw, on which the Jews recited the blessing. Apparently, there were three esrogim; one in the home of Mendel Rubinrot at 43 Nalewki Street, another with Simcha Bunem Rotenberg at 33 Nalewki, and the third with Meshulam Kaminer at 11 Pawia Street, which had been sent from Palestine before the outbreak of the war. By recycling an old lulav left over from the previous year, and with local myrtle and willow branches, they were able to assemble the requisite four species.

According to one man who came from Warsaw after the holiday, every day of the holiday there were long queues from the homes of these three people, with Jews waiting to reach the lulav and esrog to say the blessing. The esrogim turned black after being handled by thousands of people. Christians, not realizing the significance of the queues, also stood in line. (Huberband – Kiddush Hashem, p.54)

Similarly, in 1941, Eli Sternbuch and Rabbi Shaul Weingort in Switzerland sent three lulav and esrog sets to the ghetto, one of which Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg received. Again, the lines of people waiting to make use of a lulav and esrog were longer than the lines for getting water. (Gutta p.76, Feldheim, 2005)

The last Sukkos of the ghetto, September/October 1942, is perhaps the most interesting. At a time when the overwhelming majority of Jews from the ghetto had already been exterminated in Treblinka, among the remaining few, people still went to extreme lengths to fulfil their religious obligations. Two accounts of this last Sukkos in the ghetto have survived.

Dr Hillel Seidman describes how Rabbi Menachem Ziemba made a hole in the roof of his apartment in Muranowska Street, to construct a tiny sukka through which thousands of people passed. He recounts how on the eve of Sukkos he received three esrogim from Switzerland,

which he subsequently gave to Rabbi Menachem Ziemba, to the workshop of Avraham Hendel, and to Berel Gefen at the workshop on 64 Niska Street. According to Seidman, the holiday prayer services held by Rabbi Menachem were attended by Rabbi Shimshon Stockhammer, Rabbi Dovid Shapira, and many chassidim. (Seidman, Warsaw ghetto diaries p. 347) (Chidushei HaGRM”Z p. 296)

In his diary, Rabbi Reuven Feldshuh he relates to what lengths Jews were prepared to go to perform the religious obligations. Even in 1942 during the last months of the ghetto, after the mass deportations, a young orthodox man from an orthodox family, decided to go to Hungary to get the required esrog and lulav. In order to achieve this, he disguised himself as a Volks-Deutsch, fluent in German, with the right physical features, and with forged documents. He left after Rosh Hashanah, a week before the holiday. On the way he sent a message that everything was fine, and that he was already close to the border and would arrive on time to Warsaw. He did not return. Feldshuh wonders at how much the orthodox were determined to fulfil this mitzvah... “They weren’t concerned of danger, and decided to send another messenger. Maybe he would succeed.” (Feldshuh p. 483 – FELDSZUH-6-C. 00485)

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