

Behind Enemy Lines

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

Martha Cohen survived the Holocaust and even served as a spy behind German lines. Her experience in Nazi-occupied France has an important message which is associated with the holiday of Sukkot.

Martha's Story

Martha (pronounced Marta) Cohen is a ninety-nine-year-old Holocaust survivor. But her story is unique. She not only survived the Holocaust but also actively fought the Nazis during the war.

Martha was born in Metz, France, a French-German city where her grandfather served as rabbi. She had an idyllic and calm upbringing, until the Germans invaded the country in 1940.

Within a short time, the Nazis began to publicize edicts against the Jews. Almost daily, new signs would go up with rules that were designed to hamper Jewish movement. All Jewish passports were issued a special Jewish stamp, and slowly but surely, they were forbidden from entering any public spaces. They were banned from parks, restaurants, the post office, and so on.

At the time, she was twenty-one years old. One day, a former coworker met her in the street and ushered her to a quiet corner. He whispered to her that he wanted to obtain false documents which would allow her family to assume non-Jewish identities and flee the country.

Her first response was to reject the offer. It would be too dangerous for him to carry through with the plan, and it would endanger his wife and young child. But he insisted that he wanted to help them. She asked how much he would charge for the service. Bursting into tears, he said that he wasn't doing it for money. He would never be able to live with himself if he would leave them to their fate.

He provided them with the documents, and they found out that on that very night, all the Jews in the city were to be arrested. They immediately fled to the unoccupied side of France, to Marseille, where Martha finished her studies and

became a nurse. Then, she returned to Paris under her false identity.

Joining the War Effort

In August 1944, Paris was liberated from Nazi occupation and thousands of French women enlisted in the army to join the war effort. For days on end, Martha waited on line to enroll, but when her turn finally came, she was rejected. They didn't want to take her. But she insisted. She explained that as a nurse, she could be of great assistance to the soldiers, and finally, they acquiesced.

One day, her commander discovered that she spoke fluent German. She had Aryan looks, so he suggested that she move into the intelligence unit and work in espionage.

She first underwent basic training, where she excelled. Then she was taught the different levels, units and uniforms of the German military, so that she would be able to determine the rank and association of a soldier when she met one.

She also requested a photo of a German man who she would claim as her fiancée; it would help her cover story and also protect her from anyone that would try to ask her on a date. She was supplied with a photo of a German prisoner of war named Hans.

Making A Difference

When she concluded her training, it was time to sneak over the German lines. To her dismay, she failed at thirteen different attempts. In the end, she was smuggled into Germany through neutral Switzerland. When she met with a group of German soldiers, she raised her hand in a Hitler salute and became quick friends with them. They trusted her, and she began to spend a lot of time around them.

During one of her visits to this specific unit, the German commander collapsed, and she gave him the medical attention he needed. That cemented his trust, and the commander invited her to visit the Siegfried Line, the German line of defense against the Allied troops. During her visit, she discovered that they had evacuated all the soldiers. She immediately reported this irregularity to her superiors.

The next day she met with a group of high-ranking German officials, and she asked them why they had evacuated all the troops leaving the line undefended. She was answered that it was a ploy. The entire army had moved to the “Black Forest” where they planned to ambush the Allied forces. She passed on this important information, and thanks to her report, the Allies were able to catch the Germans off-guard and accelerate the ultimate victory by several weeks.

Contrary to Common Knowledge

One of the interesting elements of her story is from her stay in Nazi occupied France. She said that the French citizens didn’t cooperate with the Nazis. To the contrary, the average French man or woman was very helpful to the Jews. For example, she related that one of the anti-Semitic laws was that Jews were only permitted to shop from four-thirty to five-thirty in the afternoon. It was impossible to make it to the grocery, the bakery, the butcher within such a short time. To help them, the French store owners would prepackage their orders, so that they would be able to walk in, pay for their goods, and immediately leave.

She emphasizes that the country with the highest rate of Jewish survival - aside for Denmark - was France; seventy-five percent of French Jewry survived the war. Saving Jews under Nazi occupation was punishable by death, yet the French citizens endangered their lives time and again. Martha says that she wants to clear the name of the French people; in her personal experience, they had been very helpful whenever possible.

The Seventy Bulls

Today we celebrate Sukkot. In today’s Haftorah, we read how - in the future - even non-Jews will come to Jerusalem to celebrate Sukkot. Based on this verse, the Sages’ explained the custom to sacrifice seventy bulls in the Temple on Sukkot; they said that it represented the seventy nations of the world. On Sukkot, we pray for rain, Rashi explains, and we pray for rain for the entire world, not just for the Jewish people.

In other words, Sukkot is different than Yom Kippur; this is a holiday during which we pray for the world at large, not only for the Jewish community. The Rebbe explained that the sacrifice of seventy bulls was a mystical way to pray for

their well-being and 'uncover' their true purpose. And today, when we no longer have the Temple, we accomplish the same goal by recited the verses about those sacrifices during the Musaf prayer. When we pray Hallel and Musaf on Sukkot, we pray for the wellbeing of the non-Jewish world and we empower them to reach their fullest potential.

Therefore, Sukkot is an opportune time to remind ourselves of the good deeds of the righteous gentiles during the Holocaust. As the Rebbe said on countless occasions, by speaking of the good in someone, we actually empower them to reach the true potential of that goodness. May we merit to achieve this goal, and usher in the era when Jews and non-Jews alike will serve G-d as one.