

TEFILLIN

Chaim Basok grew up and was educated in Vilna. He was a yeshiva student and a member of the Bnei Akiva religious youth movement. One Sabbath evening in 1943, at the age of 20, he left the Vilna ghetto and joined a partisan unit. On the events of that Sabbath evening he relates:

My mother lit Sabbath candles and wept.

My grandmother lit Sabbath candles and wept.

My sisters wept.

The aunts wept.

Everyone wept.

My heart was quietly distraught.

Everyone knew I was leaving them.

And maybe it will be forever.

I am in the first group escaping this evening from the ghetto. On the way to the partisans.

I prayed 'Kabbalat Shabbat' [...] I ate my mother's cooking for the last time and each bite of the challah got stuck in my throat and choked me.

I put my tefillin in my left coat pocket and my pistol in my right coat pocket. I said the blessings quickly. My mother hugged me, her tears sticking to my cheeks, which I feel until today, they will not leave me [...]

Chaim left for the forests. At first he was a member of the Jewish partisan unit "Nekama [Revenge]," and later he joined the Lithuanian division, taking part in daring raids in which they attacked German police stations and laid mines for trains.

"In the left pocket of my coat – my tefillin, in the upper right pocket of my shirt, my small book of Tehillim [Psalms] that I never abandoned" – throughout his stay in the forest he carried his tefillin with him and took care to use them.

At the end of the war, Chaim joined the "Bricha" organization and was active in organizing Youth *Aliyah*. He himself made *Aliyah*, married, and established a family.

When his eldest son reached bar-mitzvah age, Chaim stood before the assembled guests who had come to celebrate and read the passage from the Book of Ezekiel about the vision of the

dry bones. As he read the words he began to cry, as did his friends who had fought beside him as partisans. "After the Holocaust, all of Europe was full of bones. We remained alone, beaten and bruised, wondering, could this nation be revived? All who remained are alone, beaten and bruised – can we rise up and return to life?"

Chaim continued, citing a discussion in the Talmud between sages regarding the question –did Ezekiel's vision actually happen as stated, or is it just figurative? "Rabbi Eliezer says: The dead that Ezekiel revived stood up and recited a song to God and then returned to the dead... Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yosei HaGelili, says: Not only was it not a parable, the dead that Ezekiel revived also ascended to Eretz Israel and married wives and fathered sons and daughters. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira stood up and said: I am a descendant of their sons, and these are phylacteries that my father's father left me from them" (Sanhedrin 92b).

Chaim continued, saying: "Will the day come when people ask whether the Holocaust really happened?"

"I", he said, pointing to himself, "made *Aliyah* and married a woman and here are my children". Then he took out the tefillin he received from his father Ezekiel, which he put on each day in the forests, and gave them to his son Ezekiel.

"The day will come when you will be asked if this really happened. You should say to them: These are the tefillin that my grandfather Ezekiel put on my father and gave to him, and he put them on me and gave them to me. They are my witnesses".

After 25 years, when his grandson Alexander was celebrating his own bar mitzvah, the boy stood before his grandfather Chaim and the entire family, and said: "My father told me the story. Grandpa, I promise you that if the day comes and I am asked, I will tell them, I will also tell my grandchildren and they too will know to say – it really happened" .

The glasses and the shoe both underwent a transformation from private, functional possessions to artifacts of familial remembrance, and ultimately public remembrance. What was lost and added in this process is in large part a product of the attempt to fill the deep void that remained. By its very survival, the tefillin became a symbol of continuation during and after the Holocaust, yet also served as testimony in a world in which meeting with the survivors themselves will no longer possible.

The Tefillin of Chaim Basok



The Tefilin (phylacteries) which Chaim Basok took with him when he left the ghetto to join the partisans. He prayed with them throughout the war and afterwards.

Yad Vashem Archives.