



THE WAGON
OF BIRKENAU

THE WAGON

WHEN YOU ENTER BIRKENAU, THE FIRST THING YOU SEE IS A WAGON, STANDING ALONE ON LONG TRACKS THAT RUN FROM THE GATE TO THE GAS CHAMBERS.

THIS WAGON WAS BROUGHT BACK TO BIRKENAU IN THE AUTUMN OF 2009 AND HAS SINCE BEEN SEALED. IT IS FILLED WITH THE MEMORIES OF ALL THE SOULS IT TRANSPORTED HERE – AND WITH SOMETHING MORE. INSIDE IS A SMALL BLUE VELVET PRAYER BAG. IT WAS PLACED THERE IN REMEMBRANCE OF A STORY OF RESISTANCE AND FAITH.

THE TRAGEDY OF HUNGARIAN JEWRY

By WWII, Jews had been living in Hungary for almost a thousand years. They were an integral part of the intellectual, cultural and commercial life of Hungarian society.

For most of the war they remained relatively safe. But on 19 March 1944, when Germany occupied Hungary, this changed dramatically. Within months, more than half a million Hungarian Jews were murdered, most in the gas chambers of Auschwitz Birkenau. They were brought there in wagon cars packed so tightly they couldn't move.

THE WAGON'S HISTORY

This wagon was made in Germany in the early 20th century, to carry goods across Europe. During WWII, it carried thousands of people from Hungary to their death in the Birkenau death camp.

It was discovered on the German-Dutch border in 2008 by a team sent to search for a wagon that had been used to transport Hungarian Jews in 1944. Its owner, a railway enthusiast, agreed to donate it to the Auschwitz State Museum.

The process of searching for the wagon, conserving it, and transporting it to Birkenau was undertaken by a man who was just 13 when his father disappeared in Hungary in 1944.

THE PRAYER BAG

This man decided to place the wagon in Birkenau in honor of the Hungarian Jews who were transported there. His father, Hugo Lowy, was among them. Upon his arrival in May 1944, Hugo was murdered by German soldiers, who beat him to death because he steadfastly refused to relinquish his prayer bag containing his tallit and tefillin which represented the essence of his faith.

Almost 50 years later, through a chance meeting, one of Hugo's grandsons, Peter, met a witness to this terrible event. The family finally discovered what had befallen Hugo. The torment of not knowing was over.

COMMEMORATION

A memorial ceremony was planned at Birkenau so that Hugo's soul could finally be laid to rest. Hugo's youngest son, Frank, searched for an authentic wagon to be placed next to the ramp as a memorial to the thousands of Hungarian Jews who were forced off the train there, mostly to their immediate deaths. The new director of the Auschwitz museum agreed that by seeing and touching a real wagon from the era, visitors would better understand the transportations and the tragedy of Birkenau.

On a gray, drizzly day in September 2009, the wagon arrived. A group of workers slowly pushed it under the brick archway through the "Gate of Death" until they reached the



Hugo Lowy

ramp, and then locked its wheels. In April 2010, the ceremony took place, dedicating the wagon to those who had disappeared as smoke into the gray skies above. Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the former Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel, described the wagon as a holy monument of Kiddush Hashem. Rabbi Lau wanted "every Jewish boy and girl to know the story of how Hillel Zvi Lowy sacrificed his life because he understood that without Torah, tallit and tefillin, this was no life for a Jewish man."

Sixty-six years had passed since the Nazis tore the prayer bag from him. As an everlasting memory, Hugo's youngest son brought his own prayer bag to the ceremony. He and his brother, Sanyi, stepped forward, and with their hearts breaking, placed the bag inside the wagon.

"We now have a memorial railroad car symbolizing the suffering and deportation of the Jews of Hungary. My father was among them. He was brutally murdered immediately after arrival, a few meters from the place where we are standing. This is a very emotional moment, but for me it represents the closing of a certain stage. I was thirteen years old when I lost my father. Today I am eighty."

FRANK LOWY
WAGON DEDICATION CEREMONY, 2010

