

### **Introduction (by Mitchell Rose of Cleveland)**

Moshe Kraus was a chazan in Hungary before WWII, and later in South Africa and later in Montreal. In about 2008, Moshe Kraus (referred to as "I") was visiting Cleveland Ohio and stayed at the home of Rabbi Moshe Berger of Sinai Synagogue. Chazan Kraus dictated, over the course of many hours, his autobiography into a tape recorder. I (Mitchell Rose) then transcribed, using Microsoft Word, everything Chazan Kraus dictated into a full biographical text. From that full word-per-word autobiographical text, I composed the following summary.

### **Summary (by Mitchell Rose) of Chazan Kraus' Autobiography**

I (Chazan Moshe Kraus) was born in 1922 in the city of Uzhgorod, which was, at different times, part of Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Uzhgorod had a population of 17,000, a third of which were Jewish. Most Jews in the area were Hasidim, and the Hasidism permeated the environment and influenced daily life.

My cantorial career started when I was 8 years old. I was in his home singing loudly for fun. There was a knock on the door. A man at the door introduced himself as a chazan from a neighboring city. He happened to be walking on the road and heard a beautiful voice from the house. By the end of the conversation with the family, he proposed that he take me away to live with him in the other city for a month. During that time, he would teach me how to sing and they would give concerts. It would be good for everyone. The family agreed.

From then on, it seemed like every month, I (as a boy) was invited to different city to perform concerts. By the time I was 12 years old, I was earning more money than his father. After my bar mitzvah, my father told me, "Even though we need the money you are bringing in, because we are a poor family, you have to suspend your singing career to attend yeshivah. My father brought me to the famous city of Munkach (which gentiles pronounced "Mukachevo"), to enroll in the renowned Munkacher Yeshivah, under the leadership of the famous Munkacher rebbe. [On Youtube, you can see a newsreel of Munkach and the Munkacher rebbe, taken in 1933, just before I enrolled in the yeshivah there.]

In 1939, at the age of 17, I attended a music institute in Vienna and was boarding in the home of a gentile family, consisting of two parents and a teenage daughter named Inga. One night, which later became known as Kristallnacht, I and the parents were awakened by the sound of commotion outside. I and the parents looked out a window, and saw fires burning and people yelling. We also saw, in the distance, that their daughter Inga was standing in the street talking with a Nazi teenager. As they were talking, the Nazi teenager pulled out a gun and shot her. An ambulance came and pronounced her dead. The Nazi teenager was tried in court a few days later. I and the parents were subpoenaed to appear in court to testify what we saw. After we testified, the Nazi teenager took the stand. He explained "Inga was telling him how terrible the pogrom was. When she asked if there was something I

could do to stop it, I thought she was a Jew, so I shot her. I would not have shot her if I knew she was not Jewish." The judge declared the Nazi teenager innocent. The judge explained that Inga's death was a tragedy, but an innocent mistake since the boy would not have shot her if he knew she was not Jewish. When I heard that, I realized it was a bad indication of things for come, and I left Vienna without bothering returning to the house to pick up my things. I went directly from the court house to the train station to take a train to Prague.

At age 19, I was living in Budapest and appointed to be chazan of Budapest's main synagogue, with the title of chief cantor of Budapest.

In 1943, I was sent to a work camp called Bor, where Jews were worked, tortured and killed. The camp was run by Hungarian guards who reported to German guards. I would help lift the inmates' spirits by going barrack to barrack singing for the inmates. Many of the inmates were Chasidim. One day, one of the Chasidic inmates told me "I have good news. I asked the camp administration for permission to hold Kol Nidrai services on Yom Kippur. And the inmates would like you to be the chazan." I agreed. To prepare for the service, some inmates fashioned pieces of cloth into a chazan's costume. Others erected a canopy in the courtyard. Yom Kippur night arrived. I stood under the canopy in his chazan's costume, with 2000 inmates standing in the courtyard. I led Kol Nidrai, all by heart since no one had a Siddur. It must have been very meaningful for the inmates. Even some German guards were standing around in the courtyard, to listen to what they probably considered an interesting spectacle. In the middle of Kol Nidrai, I heard people yelling in Yiddish "Beat it! The Hungarian guards are coming!" and all 2000 inmates scattered. Hungarian guards entered the yard, to find me standing alone, under the canopy, in my chazan costume. A guard grabbed me and told me "You are going before a tribunal." The next morning, I appeared before a 3-man tribunal. They sentenced me to hang by his arms for 10 hours. Two Jewish boys were sentenced to the same thing. Right after the tribunal, they hung me and the 2 boys by our arms, from behind this back in a half-nelson configuration. What occurred during our hanging was common with others who sentenced to this punishment, in that periodically, when er boys would pass out from the excruciating pain, the guards would let us down, splash water on us to revive us, and hang us back up, so that we would be conscious the entire time to endure the excruciating pain the entire time. As I was hanging there, inmates would pass by, offering him words of empathy and support. After 10 hours, the guards let me down and threw me in a small windowless solitary-confinement cell, and threw in a bowl of porridge, and left me there for several days. I couldn't eat the porridge, because my arms were paralyzed for several days; so I couldn't lift the bowl to my mouth or even support my torso to lean down to lap up the porridge like a dog. The only reason I did not starve to death in the cell was that an inmate, the same inmate that arranged the Kol Nidrai service, risked his own life to break into the cell each night to spoon-feed me. After several

days, the commandant entered the cell and exclaimed in amusement "You're still alive!?" and kicked me sharply in my spine; which brought me further excruciating pain in my back for the next month. I later learned that the 2 boys that were sentenced to both hanging by arms and solitary confinement did not survive; they died in the solitary confinement cell. I assume the main reason they died was from starvation in the cell, since they had no one broke into their cells to spoon-feed them, like I had.

The last concentration camp I was in was Bergen Belson. As in Bor, I would go from barrack to barrack singing to lift the inmates' spirits. Each barrack held about 800 inmates, so packed together that each bench/bunk held several inmates. However, there was one barrack in which the inmates were treated a little better. They had more room, with only about 90 inmates, so each inmate had his own bunk. And a little more food. They were all from the same Jewish neighborhood near Warsaw, from which the Jews were known to be very tough. These inmates had stayed together and survived 5 years in different camps, so even the Nazis respected their ability to survive and treated them better. Their leader was a Jew named Godol, who was very respected in the camp.

One day, Godol sent one of his men to call me to his barrack. I wasn't going to go, but someone from our barrack told me "You don't refuse Godol. If he calls you, do what he says." The messenger took me to his barrack, and Godol told me that he would like me to sing for him. After I sang, he threw me a morsel of bread, and insisted I eat it before I leave his barrack, to ensure I don't share it with anyone else. He invited me to move to his barrack. At first I agreed, and he sent an inmate to help me retrieve my few belongings from my barrack. But when in my barrack, I changed my mind and explained to the messenger "How can I dishearten my friends in my barrack by abandoning them. Tell Godol I will stay in my barrack, and I will for him any time he calls for me." From then on, Godol would call for me about 1-2 times per week, and after I would sing, he would throw me a morsel of food. That little extra food kept me from gradually starving to death.

This continued for about 6 months. Until one morning, about 4 months before liberation, we were awakened by the guards at 5:00 AM, half hour before usual. Some inmates conjectured that the guards are planning to kill us all so that we won't fall into the hands of the Allied soldiers. We all stood in formation in front of our barracks. In front of us stood a gallows on a platform. The commandant walked up the gallows with Godol, and announced that everyone from Godol's barrack had escaped. They were all caught and shot, except for Godol. They kept Godol alive to hang him publicly as a lesson to the other inmates. Then the commandant called me up to the gallows. He explained to me that Godol's last wish was for me to sing the prayer for the dead, which is Kel Moleh Rachamim. I started to sing it. In the middle, I asked Godol for his official Hebrew name, and he responded "Godol ben Dovid miTzloftzfah" (Tzloftzofza is a city near Bendeen which is near Krakow). Then Godol kept repeating it, each time with more loudness and intensity. In the middle of this,

the commandant lost patience and kicked the lever of the gallows, which dropped the panel beneath Godol. We could see and hear Godol strangle. I went back to my place, without completing the Kel Moleh. I realized how lucky I was that I declined Godol's offer for me to join his barrack.

In 1945, we were liberated by the English army. Afterward, Bergen Belson was designated as an assembly point for displaced persons to recuperate. As I was recuperating, they gave me a private room. A rabbi from England gave me a pair of tefillin. At first, I was excited to use them. But I became disillusioned as I recited different passages in davening that seemed ridiculous in view of my experience, such as the prayer thanking Gd for his tremendous pity and providing all my needs, which seemed ridiculous in view of my experience of lacking food and losing, to my knowledge at the time, all my extended family. For 3 weeks, I stopped keeping Jewish laws. I even smoked on Shabbos. What convinced me to return to Judaism, is that each Friday night, when I would sit alone in my room eating supper and smoking a cigarette, I felt empty, without a table cloth, candles, wine and family. So, I went back to keeping Jewish laws. But it still tormented me how I could praise Gd in prayer.

Later, as I would meet different great rabbis who survived the war, I would pose this question to them, and obtained no satisfactory answer. Until I heard a story about the Kotzker rebbe that gave me the answer: That as bad as it was for me to be a holocaust survivor agonizing over the loss of his family members, it could have been worse. It could have been me that some other survivor is agonizing over. Based on what I went through, I should not have survived the war. It was only due to a series of lucky occurrences -- small miracles from Gd -- that let me survive.

The story that taught me this lesson is the following: Once, a Kotzker chasid sat down before the Kotzker Rav for advice. The chasid explained the following: "When I visited you last year, I met another Kotzker chasid who was visiting you at the same time. We became friends. We realized we had a lot in common, and were impressed with each other, including the fact that both of us were wealthy. We made a shiduch between my son and his daughter. Our children got engaged. He and I agreed to share the burden of financially supporting the future-newlyweds during their first year of marriage. Well, I just found out that my mechutin went bankrupt. So now I request your advice on how to break off the engagement without hurting my mechutin's feelings?" The Kotzker Rav answered "Consider yourself very fortunate. It could have been worse. Instead of you sitting here asking me how to break off the engagement because your mechutin lost his wealth, it could have been your mechutin sitting here asking me how to break off the wedding because you lost your wealth. My answer to you is that the wedding will go on. And whatever financial help the newlyweds need that your mechutin can no longer provide, you will pay entirely yourself, and you will consider yourself lucky that Gd gave you enough money to help your child." It was that story (about the Kotzker Rav) that taught me that it makes sense for me to praise Gd since my situation could have been worse.