

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

He had always looked old since Tom first met him. He was sitting on the steps of his caravan carving a rabbit from a piece of broken chair leg. Tom had come to see him because he had been told he, Yosho la Mozesko, would know about the Gypsies who died in Nazi concentration camps during the war. He had survived one himself.

"Yes," he said, as he dug the point of his knife deep into the wood, "I was there, but I can't see much point in talking about it. It's gone, and most of those who were in the camps have gone, too." "But how," Tom asked, "did you survive?" "I survived, my boy, because God wanted me to survive. But I can't imagine Him doing all that for me just so I could sit and talk to curious young men about life in the camp. If I have to talk about anything, it is about Him and what He has done for me, and you, too, as you would know if you only read the Book."

It was not a very promising start, Tom thought at the time. He had been commissioned to prepare a report on the Nazi persecution of the Gypsies. He had already collected the statistics, that more than half a million Gypsies had been killed in concentration camps and thousands more crippled and maimed from experiments carried out on them.

But he wanted more than plain facts. He needed people, not figures. He was looking for the personal touches, the reflections of what life was like for Gypsies in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

In Yosho la Mazesko he found much more than this. He found a faith that he did not believe existed and a trust and belief in God that he envied. He found, too, a love for a God that he, at that time, thought of as a myth.

Tom talked with Yosho many times over the years. He sat with him by a campfire at Les Saintes Maries in southern France, where the Gypsies gather each year for their festival. He listened to the story of his life in a winter camp near Cologne in Germany. And he has drunk of this wisdom at roadsides in France, Belgium, Holland and Italy.

Yosho is of the Lovara tribe of Gypsies, nomads who travel across Europe, once with their horses and heavy wagons, but nowadays in their large cars and luxury trailers. Yosho himself was born in Czechoslovakia. He does not know exactly when he was born because birth certificates and things of the sort are, to Gypsies, just nuisances.

By the age of twenty, Yosho had travelled with his tribe throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. Life was enjoyable but hard. The sun was free, he once commented, but so was the rain. Food was sometimes plentiful, but at other times even bread and flour were scarce. Gypsies hunted deer and rabbits near their camps and fished at every opportunity. But, then as now, they were always surrounded by a hostile "gajo" (the Gypsy word for a non-Gypsy) population, who looked on the Lovara as parasites and the scum of the earth. Police constantly moved the Gypsies on. But for Yosho this was part of everyday life, and anything different seemed strange.

Yosho married and had five children. He was looked up to by the other members of the tribe, mainly because of his strength, his ability with his fists, and his tongue. He thought life could not possibly be better, but then he met Yaija Sattler.

Sattler had just had his Lovara version of St. John's Gospel published by the British and Foreign Bible Society, and Yosho bought one, although he could not read a word of it. But the more he listened to Sattler the more he wanted to read the "Book," as he called it.

He found a young German social worker to help him, and every evening for a year they studied together, until at last Yosho knew "O Woyako Hiro," as the Gospel is called in Lovara, almost by heart.

"I knew," he recalled later, "that I was home. God had found me. It was not because of the words themselves," he pointed out, "but because they told the story of a Man who wandered around as I do. It told of a Man who died for others." Yosho came to know Christ not as some historical figure but as a real person who would understand him. His realisation that he belonged to Christ came as no great flash of light. "There were no fireworks," he explains. "One night as I sat outside the wagon reading by the firelight, I came to the words in my Book which said, "Whoever accepts what I say and obeys, he is the one who loves me. And the Father will love him, and I too will love him and show myself to him." And when I read that, it all came clear. I loved this Jesus and he loved me. What more could any man want?"

But those days were difficult ones for Gypsies in Germany. Hitler had decided that, like the Jews, Gypsies were an inferior race and a danger to the purity of German blood. So in 1938, Yosho and his family were confined to one of the camps set up for Gypsies near Leipzig. He soon heard stories of other Gypsies being taken to concentration camps and of the atrocities committed there, but he took little notice and certainly had no fear. His Book, he told his family, said that God cared so much for the world that He gave His own Son to die for it. He would protect them.

But the persecution of the Gypsies increased, and one night in 1941, Yosho and his clan were herded into trucks and driven across the country to a camp with no horses or wagons - only barbed wire and rows of huts. The name of it was Auschwitz.

When the Gypsies arrived at their destination, all - even the women and children - were stripped and their heads shaved. Their clothes were confiscated, and they were issued striped uniforms. Somehow, Yosho managed to hold onto his Gospel of St. John, which he read and reread until his eyes burned, and the print on the paper blurred. Yosho lived by what the Book said, even in that terrible place. Those who watched him marvelled. Dr. Moshe Lenemann, now a surgeon in south Germany, but at that time an inmate in Auschwitz, commented, "He was an inspired man; of that there can be no doubt. His faith was not mine, but I envied him his peace of mind. He would go round the compound, this uncultured, uneducated man of the roads, and with a word cheer up the saddened and light up the place that was darkness itself!"

The guards did everything they could do to make life difficult for Yosho. They forced him to double-round the compound perimeter with a heavy stone held above his head, but he would just smile at them through the sweat. Though his arms ached in agony, he would walk away with them swinging at his sides. Once he was hung up by the thumbs over a cesspit until he fainted, but when the guard took him down and he came to, he looked the Nazi in the eye and said simply, "Thank you. I was getting a little tired!" He was beaten on many occasions, but he made no sound. He simply closed his eyes and recited to himself parts of his Book. Finally the guards realized how they could break Yosho's spirit. He was taken out behind the medical hut, where beatings were usually carried out: and after they had beaten him, one of them took the Book from him and tore it up in front of the Gypsy's eyes. And for the first time they saw him break as he knelt down and sobbed, "You have taken away the key to my life." He expected the guards to

beat him more, but they just took the pieces of Yosho's Book and left him there. "They left me alone," he said, "because God filled their souls with shame."

With his Book gone, Yosho prayed for guidance. Some of the inmates laughed at him for this. In the middle of the squalor and the horror of Auschwitz, here was a man talking to God, and talking about a Book.

"What do you expect?" they asked him. "Do you think that God will send a specially prepared edition just for you? How can you go on believing in a God in a place like this?" "God", he replied, "has been in worse places than this to visit His people. If He was at Golgotha when they killed His son, He is here, too, if you will only reach out for Him."

Then one day a guard named Schaeffer, who had shown no particular friendship before, came to the hut and marched Yosho around to the back of the medical block again. But there was no beating. Schaeffer just pushed a book into his hands and walked away without a word. The book was a German New Testament.

Although Yosho spoke the language, he could not read it, so he persuaded one of the other inmates to read it to him. He found that once he had a cue for a particular verse or chapter it all came back to him. He would then dictate it in Lovara to a Gypsy who could write, and slowly the Gypsy version of St. John was taken down on any scraps of paper that could be found.

Other Gypsies now took an interest, and Yosho and his scribes found that they had to make several copies of some of the chapters which Gypsies, who had never even thought of the Bible before, wanted for themselves.

Yosho soon found himself becoming a preacher. At night he would hold little gatherings where he would read "O Woyako Hiro" to them and explain what it meant to him. His explanations were simple and personal as he had no theological training, neither had he read anything else except John's Gospel before. But what he said came from his heart, "where," he said, "it had been put by God."

One day in 1944, a Jewish inmate, who had been borrowing one of the half dozen or so copies of "O Woyako Hiro," presented Yosho with a small parcel. Everyone had wondered why this man wanted the copy in the beginning. He was not a Gypsy, and could not understand the language; but now they knew. Inside the parcel was a copy of "O Woyako Hiro" transcribed in beautiful copperplate handwriting and bound in leather from an old pair of shoes. This man, Jakob Hoffmann, became a Christian before he died in the gas chamber. He also taught Yosho about the Old Testament and the meanings of some of the words of the prophets quoted by New Testament writers.

The terrors of a Nazi concentration camp continued. Men and women were marched off for "special recreation" or "medical checks," but they never returned from the large concrete chambers at the far end of the camp.

Then, on the night of July 31, 1944, a guard took Yosho from his hut and locked him in a small cabin where the guards' sports equipment was kept. Nothing was said. After a day and a half another guard, again without a word, took him out and put him into a new hut with some Czech prisoners. Then Yosho found out that the day before, 1,600 of the 2,000 Gypsies in Auschwitz had been taken, en masse, to the gas chambers. Among them were Yosho's wife and three of his sons. It was the Night of the Long Knives for the Gypsies, as all over Germany and the occupied countries Himmler's order had gone out. More than 40,000 were gassed in more than a dozen camps.

Yosho grieved for his family and prayed the simple question, "Why?"

"The answer," he said, "did not come then, and for a while I began to believe God had deserted me, but the answer was not far away." Nine weeks later, again without any reason being given, Yosho was handed some civilian clothes and released. "God," he added, "had something for me to do."

Until the end of the war he ate and slept where he could and talked to people he met about the Book and its message. When the war ended, he managed to find the remnants of his tribe. He tried to get another copy of "O Woyako Hiro," but when a French pastor wrote for him to the British and Foreign Bible Society in London, he found that it was out of print. But he still had the hand-written copy made for him by Jacob Hoffmann, and he read it to everyone who would listen. He learned to read German so that he could read the whole of the New Testament for himself.

Only two hundred of his clan were left out of the three thousand before the war, but they took to their old way of life as though the war had never happened, travelling again across Europe, in the beginning skirting around Germany whenever they could. But in time even their memories of the war faded.

In 1958, Yosho heard of a new church, a Gypsy church, and he was told of a young Gypsy preacher, Manz Rheinhardt, who was preaching in France and Germany.

Yosho went to find him, but found much more. He discovered that the Gypsy church was a growing one and that among its members were men and women from all the Gypsy tribes of Western Europe. To Yosho this was a dream come true, a prayer answered that "my very own people whom I love should know the God whom I love even more, and should read the Book which tells of His love."

Yosho was what Christ wants a man to be. He had courage, honesty, compassion, understanding, and above all, an unshakeable faith and belief in, and love for, God.
