

Two Butchers: Circumcision in Nazi Germany

by Fred M. B. Amram

2009. 31'H x 19' W, Acrylic on canvas, Plexiglas and wood.

David Feinberg. Drawing contributions of genocide survivor Fred Amram and artists Bonnie Brabson, Mary George, Jason Krumrai, Peter Lommen, Rachel Mosey, Rowan Pope, Nicole Rodriguez, Adam Streeter, and Stephanie Thompson

Throughout all generations, every male shall be circumcised when he is eight days old...This shall be my covenant in your flesh, an eternal covenant. (Genesis 17:1-14).

God spoke to Moses, telling him to speak to the Israelites: When a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy...And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Leviticus 12:1-3).

Two butchers attended my circumcision.

It was late in September of 1933. I was eight days old. The day had been set aside for my circumcision. Ashkenazi Jews called it a bris. Sephardic Jews called it a brit or more formally a brit milah, a ritual circumcision. Either way it's a big deal and a party was scheduled in our fourth floor apartment.

Nowadays circumcisions are commonplace and they're usually performed in hospitals shortly after birth. However, for religious Jews a special ceremony is involved and, certainly, when I was still a tad in Hannover, Germany, a bris involved relatives, dinner, drinking-a major celebration. After all, one is celebrating the birth of a male child.

The relatives had arrived. Uncle Max came from Hamburg. Aunt Beda, whose hugs I adored during my adolescence because of her substantial bosom, came with her husband, Uncle Ernst, from Berlin. My widowed grandmothers, of course. And my mother's sister Carola and her husband Kurt, who never had children of their own and doted on me, drove all the way from Kassel. Friends from the synagogue were there. And then entered the butcher Goldman.

Theological regulations "circumscribe" the ritual for circumcisions. A professional circumciser is hired. In Hebrew he's called a Mohel, in Yiddish a Moyl. While the butcher Goldman was not a certified rabbi, he had the special training of a Moyl. He knew the ritual, the prayers, the cutting technique and he had a sharp knife.

Moyl Goldman, a small, heavily bearded man in his mid-forties, began by blessing the wine. Almost all Jewish ceremonies begin with a blessing for wine. It's a marvel that we're sober most of the time. Papa

placed a few drops of wine on my lips, presumably as an anesthetic. I was expected to join in blessing the wine. I gurgled my best imitation of a Hebrew blessing. When the Moyl became serious I let out a bellow.

I've been asked by friends to provide more details about the event. Unfortunately, three factors interfere with my memory. First, expert as old Goldman was, the pain was excruciating. Second, in some Jungian flashback, I was reliving Everyman's fear of losing his manhood. And, third, I was drunk.

I know that Goldman washed his hands in a special bowl and said the blessing for washing the hands. Jews have a blessing for everything. After more prayers and blessings he cut.

Papa paid Mr. Goldman who then returned to his regular job. He was the local kosher butcher.

Then the dinner. Mutti started ushering the guests to a fine buffet when we heard music. A marching band. Uncle Max, the family tease, announced that there was to be a parade in the honor of my manhood. Several guests believed that he could pull off such a trick. Imagine, celebrating a Jewish babe in Nazi Germany with a parade.

As the music became louder everyone rushed to the windows. Our apartment had a small balcony and Papa carried me outside to see my first parade. There were soldiers in khaki uniforms and shining leather boots. There were drums and clarinets and all the wonderful brass instruments one expects in a marching band. And between platoons of more soldiers we looked down on a long black open car. The man standing near the back of the car had dark hair and a mustache. Just as he came to our balcony he saluted with an outstretched arm at a forty five degree angle. At that sign the platoons of German military might also have saluted and shouted, "Heil Hitler." Mutti pulled us inside. Adolph Hitler was not a welcome guest at my bris. He was, however, the second butcher to attend.

Is there a blessing for two butchers at a bris?

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