

Looking Back at Auschwitz and Forward to Israel

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Walking through Auschwitz a few weeks ago with members of our synagogue I came face to face for the first time in my life with the place that has become a synonym for the Holocaust. The German form of the word for the nearby Polish town, Oswiecim has become a metaphor for the efforts to annihilate the Jewish people and to extinguish the Jewish religion. Standing and looking at the magnitude of the largest concentration and extermination camp and seeing the crematoria that burned bodies, the piles of ashes and the barracks where people were crowded into cramped, unsanitary conditions, it was clear that Auschwitz is more than a symbolic metaphor. It was real, a place where the massive systematic murder of over a million and a half people was carried out; where, first hundreds, and eventually, thousands of lives were extinguished each and every day, for a period lasting several years, in the effort to exterminate the Jewish people, up until its liberation in 1945.

Because of its central location Jews were transported on rail cars from all over Nazi-occupied Europe to Auschwitz to be killed. Despite the cynical words that greeted them, "Arbeit macht frei: work makes free", despite the deceptive tactics, such as having an orchestra play music when people arrived, contrary to the lies told to them that they were going to take a shower, we know what really transpired there. Upon their arrival inmates were forced to write postcards home telling their families that they had arrived safely, that they should not worry about them, and that they were being treated well. The suitcases the prisoners brought with them, containing what few precious remaining possessions they owned were seized and the contents stolen by the Nazi guards. Hair was shorn to be used in mattresses. Gold extracted from teeth was melted down. Exhibits displaying all of this -- piles of hair, of eyeglasses and of suitcases attest to what, along with harsh labor, starvation and cruel medical experiments that would not even be conducted on animals, was done at Auschwitz.

As Sebastian Vilar Rodrigex wrote about his fellow Europeans, "In Auschwitz we burned a culture, thought, creativity, and talent. We destroyed the Chosen People, truly chosen, because they produced great and wonderful people who changed the world. The contribution of this people is felt in all areas of life: science, art, international trade, and above all, as the conscience of the world. These are the people we burned."

Henry Guterman, father of Irv Guterman, a Holocaust survivor of several camps who traveled with us, quietly said to me upon our arrival as I stood next to him, "My feet are trembling to be standing here."

We also went to Warsaw, the site of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Terezin, the so-called "model" concentration camp outside of Prague, where almost all of the Jews living there were eventually murdered. Especially memorable was a neighborhood in Berlin which once was predominantly Jewish. There are signs on poles every few feet in a nondescript area that reminded me of Dupont Circle. One sign had a drawing on one side of a park bench, and on the other the Nuremberg Law and the date it was enacted prohibiting Jews from sitting on park benches. Another sign had a picture of a doctor's office, and the law prohibiting non-Jews from going to Jewish doctors, and so on. A train station in another residential area in the heart of Berlin was the place where Jews were taken and deported over a period of years from Germany to ghettos and eventually concentration camps. We visited Wansee, the site of the infamous meeting where the heads of departments gathered to coordinate plans to carry out the Final solution in as efficient a manner as possible.

These images were on my mind when I celebrated Passover this year with my family a couple of weeks ago. Recalling the important words of the Hagadah which commands each and every Jew to feel as though he or she went out of Egypt, I recalled Sallai Meridor saying that for our generation, each and every Jew must feel as though he or she went out of Auschwitz.

Memories of what I saw in Europe were on my mind when Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day was commemorated earlier this week and when I went to the Holocaust Museum on the Mall on Thursday and read aloud in the Hall of Remembrance names of victims of the Holocaust. Local clergy, both Jewish and non-Jewish are invited to come and to read aloud names of victims during the national days of remembrance. I was told that people usually read a page or two. I looked through the binder handed to me, and choose to read pages of names of people who were from Hungary, Ukraine, Poland, Prague, and Germany, all places I have visited in the past year. The protocol is that you read the name, and then choose information on the sheet which tells something about the person – usually it is the town the person is from, their age, and the date and place of death. Having just returned from these places of destruction, it did not feel right to say that these people had died. They did not die. They were killed. They were murdered. And so when I said where their lives ended, instead of saying that they died, I said they perished, or were killed or murdered, for I felt that was a more accurate and appropriate description.

One of the most powerful, meaningful and emotional moments for me was when we were walking through Auschwitz and saw two groups of Israelis who were also there. When you tour Auschwitz, you are given headphones, as is done in many museums, so you can listen to a particular channel and hear your guide give explanations of what you are seeing. As we walked I switched back and forth to another channel so I could listen in on the explanations being given by the Israeli guide in Hebrew to the officers from Israel's armed forces who were touring the barracks and other areas a step or two ahead of or behind us. There was such a gentleness, a softness to the tone of the guide, such a sensitivity to the way in which he explained what happened to us here. When speaking of the Jews, he did not use third person, but spoke in first person plural.

Noticing the uniform of one of the officers, Robin Hammer, from our group, said inquisitively to one of the officers, "Navy." And the man merely responded, with pride in his voice, "Israeli Navy", as if to say he wanted to be sure we knew where he was from. Cherry Goldblatt approached one of the officers and thanked him for protecting the Jewish people.

If I would have only encountered the members of the Israeli armed forces at Auschwitz, I could say, *Dayenu*. It would have been enough. But as we walked through the remnants of the part of the complex adjoining it, the camp known as Birkenau, we saw young people, young Jews from Israel and elsewhere, who were wearing Israeli flags, with the Star of David. They were draped across their backs, like capes. These young people were not afraid to proclaim who they are. They were not embarrassed to openly display their identity. On the contrary, 70 years after Jews were forced to wear a yellow Jewish star as a badge of shame these young Jews proudly, openly, defiantly wore the flag of the Jewish state as a badge of honor.

And so this shabbat if we look back to the past week, we recall and remember the victims of the Holocaust, whose lives and stories are remembered on Yom HaShoah. But if we look ahead to Monday night and Tuesday we celebrate the 65th anniversary of the rebirth of the State of Israel. The juxtaposition of the two days, the two events, reminds us of who and what we are and of our responsibility as Jews to our fellow Jews.

Perhaps this is why when Yitzhak Rabin, the first Prime Minister of Israel to visit Poland in 1993 looking at the monument to the camp's victims said, "We swear to you, as long as we live, as long as Israel as a nation is alive, such a tragedy will never happen again. Today, after 50 years, we have enough power and spiritual energy . . . to protect our new home against its enemies, enough to grant asylum to those persecuted, enough to repel all those who conspire against us." He added, "We will defend every Jew in every corner of the Earth at any price. Your blood has not been shed in vain."

And so Auschwitz and Israel are bound together, whether we like it or not. Hopefully we will take the lessons of the Holocaust and understand why it is so important for Israel to be strong and why we must stand together, for while Israel exists not because of the Holocaust, the Holocaust explains why Israel must exist.

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