

Auschwitz as an Object of Contemplation
By Lenore Flynn
Presented November 25, 2007
at the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

As I rode on the bus from Krakow to Oswiecim, Poland, whose Germanized name Auschwitz is a worldwide symbol of inhumanity, the place I was heading toward loomed out there in the distance. I felt like I was bound for an abyss. I had no idea what to expect or how I would react. I had read many books about this place and watched many films but I knew I couldn't really prepare for it. Even packing for this trip was unusual; how do you dress to visit a death camp?

As I walked through the infamous gate and I thought of the thousands and thousands of people who walked through here daily returning from back-breaking work to heartbreaking despair. I stood in a courtyard where thousands of men, women and children were placed against a wall and shot; we offered a small emotional ceremony there as a group. I entered the gas chamber, dark and cold, and gazed up at the two shafts of lights coming through the ceiling; openings where gas was dropped in after the doors had closed. Then into the crematorium, the ceiling blackened. In Birkenau, the camp adjacent to Auschwitz where 4 gas chambers operated, I walked down the roads where hundreds of thousands had taken their last steps on this earth. I stood in the beautiful birch wood where women, children and elderly people who were deemed unfit for work waited for their turn because the lines were long and the process, efficient as it was, sometimes was backed up because of the large number of people going through. I stood in the place called the "Sauna" where new prisoners who would go on to work as slaves were processed. Hundreds of pictures of people who came to the camp covered a display in the center of the Sauna and the Rabbi with us read Kaddish as we faced those pictures.

I sat in meditation at the site called the Judenramp where the trains unloaded families who had been brought from far away and where the selections were made. We took turns reading names of those who had died there; four of us reading at a time our voices calling out over one another. Sometimes a whole page of people with the same last name. Some people read the names of their family members who had died there.

I sat in vigil at night in a barracks where new prisoners were cruelly introduced to the way it was in the camp by the guards and capos. I visited and meditated and offered Buddhist prayers for healing and liberation at Block 25 known as the "death block"; a place where women who could no longer work or who were very ill were confined and they waited, sometimes for days, for the truck to come and take them to the gas chamber at the other end of the camp. There was no other way out of that block.

We stayed outdoors all day regardless of the weather and it was cold, rainy or sleeting. We met in small groups to share our thoughts and feelings as we went through our days in Birkenau.

Poland was my father's home country and the home of my grandparents on both sides. I told most people I was going to Poland because it was the country whose traditions and language filled my childhood.

In the small number of people I told about my trip to Auschwitz, very few allowed themselves to ask the question of why I was going. Some of you may have asked yourself why someone would want to go there when you saw the subject of today's sermon. It is easier to understand a brief visit because of historical interest or to pay tribute but a sustained presence there is quite another matter. I believe that it is fear that drives us away from places like Auschwitz; fear of what happened there, fear of it happening to us and fear of our part in it. Many people on the retreat spoke of these fears.

In most cases, we can keep the fear of a place like Auschwitz at bay because it is happening to someone else, somewhere else. We are comfortable in our lives; we have food and water, safety and security. What is happening or has happened, happened to the "Other" and has been perpetrated by the "Other". It is the creation of this "Other" that we must contemplate and understand if we are ever to see an end to places like Auschwitz. Philosopher Theodor Adorno even goes as far as to say "Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughter house and thinks: they're only animals."

Lawrence Langer, a Holocaust historian who recorded many eyewitness testimonies, tells us that "every future generation will have to be educated anew in how to face the historical period we call the Holocaust." He suggests this must be done "not through abstract formulas...but in graphic detail." What was done, how it was done and by whom. It needs to make "an indelible and subversive impression on their moral, political, philosophical and psychological assumptions about individual behavior, the nature of reality and the process of history." I thought I knew a lot about this period in history because I had watched Holocaust movies and I had seen many photographs. I knew so little.

We can decide, so do I turn my face away or do I look, do I bear witness to these human tragedies so I can move toward understanding them and ultimately prevent them?

We want to hate the perpetrators for what they did to the people in those camps. We want to condemn them and feel we are above what they did. Never can we imagine ourselves killing children and their mothers in the cruelest ways. We cannot imagine being party to mass starvation and enslavement. The planning and actions in the gas chambers and crematoriums are beyond all comprehension. Yet the perpetrators were, by most accounts, ordinary people. Recently discovered photos of the soldiers and staff at Auschwitz show them in loving poses with their pets and families and joining together in laughter. We cannot look at them and say they appear as monsters. In the beginning of the war, men from the countryside were recruited for the squads who herded people into picturesque fields and ended their lives with bullets. Over one million human lives ended this way by 3,000 men over 2 years. One million four hundred thousand lives ended at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

I do not give these numbers for any other reason than to enlighten, to create a context for understanding the loss to all of us. We cannot face these issues with a sidelong glance; we must face them full on. We are connected with the survivors and

the perpetrators. The numbers mean nothing without the faces and the stories they represent.

I am here to tell you the story of an Auschwitz survivor I met..... He was on the first transport of Polish prisoners to Auschwitz on 6/14//1940. The camp was originally intended for Polish prisoners and then Russian prisoners of war. He was a talented artist, even at his young age, and in return for a drawing he made for someone who had the power to control the flow of soup, he received an extra ration of soup. He eagerly began to eat his second ration but as he looked up he saw his bunkmate sitting opposite lifting his already empty spoon to his mouth and making swallowing motions. His friend was pretending to eat a non-existent second helping along with his friend. He couldn't bear this and he shared his soup with his friend. Because he did this he was condemned to death. Someone who had access to prison records exchanged his record with the record of Marian Koloziejca, a prisoner who had already died. So he became prisoner #432, Marian Koloziejca, and through his whole life he kept this name. He spent 5 years in Auschwitz. He has never publicly revealed his real identity. As he told his story to us, several times he emphasized "You need to know for 5 years I was not a human being."

At the age of 70 he suffered a stroke. He had never spoken or written about his camp experiences. He began drawing as therapy to rehabilitate his paralyzed hand. What he created were wall sized pencil drawings that I can only described to you as pictures of hell. In the installation he created these hundreds of drawings cover the walls, ceilings and floor. You can barely breathe as you look on them. He is now 82 and only wants to complete this installation with a small Zen garden; it is his final wish. He generously shared his time and story with us. I am his witness.

Elie Wiesel, himself a Holocaust survivor, says" he or she who listens to a witness becomes a witness because a survivor was a witness. He or she who listens to a witness becomes a witness." You are now Marian Koloziejca's witnesses.

Genocide begins with separation of one group from another.

I look at you and you are not like me and I need to separate you. In some way, real or perceived, your existence threatens mine.

In the study of genocide, it is noted that most genocides begin with the issuing of identity cards or the making of lists. The recent genocide in Rwanda began because the Belgians needed a way to divide the people of Rwanda to serve their own ends. They created the division between the Hutu and Tutsi by issuing identity cards, through creating lists. A woman from Rwanda who attended the retreat told us before this all Rwandans lived harmoniously, a division did not exist in their minds. Once such lists are made, they can be used. The lists made there made it easy to find the people targeted for death.

We are bound to learn about the root causes of genocide and do what we can to stop it from happening. We are bound to the human beings who suffer through our common humanity and they deserve to be heard. I am one generation away from being born in Poland. The Nazi plan was to eliminate the Poles after their slave labor paved the way for the new settlements. When I saw Hitler's statement regarding the extermination of the Poles at the Holocaust Museum a chill ran through me followed by a deep sadness. After the Jews, the Poles sustained the most losses of life in the camps.

I am here today bearing 1.4 million messages. They were entrusted to me in the most elemental manner. They came to me through rock, soil and rain. They came through the fire of every flame that burned in every memorial candle that covered the landscape I walked on. They came to me through the concrete of the gas chamber wall I leaned against in meditation. They came to me through the black soot that covered the ceiling of the crematorium. They came to me in the leaves that fell in the birch wood where women and children and elders waited for their turn. I am transmitting my witness to you. From the voices of the survivor I met who lost his whole family in the camp, from Marian who endured 5 years of not being human in the camp, and from the Polish resistance fighter who risked everything to escape from Auschwitz and was one of 2 in 7 who survived.

Elie Wiesel also tells us: to bear witness to memory is *with* memory, not *to* memory. Memory helps us in our witness and the main effort to bear witness is to tell the truth. There is a tendency in so many people to reduce the truth to comfort; it is more comfortable, more convenient to remember certain things, but not others, and those that want to commit their lives to truth, that means we remember everything.” He goes on to say: “Even if we cannot, we must. If there is no hope, we must invent it and we can invent it. If we with our work help only one human being, then we should do it, and we can usually help more. The main thing is we help ourselves by speaking up; we have an image of ourselves, a sense of responsibility that must be demonstrated by intervening, by shouting, by protesting.”

As a Buddhist, I took a vow to reduce suffering. I take this vow over and over as part of my practice. Through bearing witness this vow is fulfilled. The truth gives me wisdom and only through wisdom can I begin to create compassionate action.

I have born witness to victim and perpetrator alike. I have listened to their stories. I came to know the stories of German children who grew up in Nazi Germany and their families. I came to know the stories of Poles and Gypsies and how they suffered through loss and oppression. I came to know the stories of the Jewish people and their faith. I came to know the stories of the men who pulled the triggers of the guns that shot innocent unarmed people and of those who planned and executed the “Final Solution.”

This has brought me to a deeper understanding of hatred and violence, of survival and humanity. It has brought me to a deeper understanding of my father, whose family fled from their dangerous situation in Poland after the 1st World War, and of his sadness and deep mistrust of other people.

I leave you with another quote from Elie Wiesel:

“Forgetting means the end of civilization....the end of generosity, the end of compassion, the end of humanity.....Memory is a shield.

If we remember what people can do to each other, then we can help those who tomorrow may be threatened by the same enemy do something. In order to feel empathy and compassion for and with a person who is alone, suffering and in desperation, it's only because we remember others who were alone, suffering and in despair.”