

Commemorative Way in Birkenau

ICCJ 5 July 2011

INTRODUCTION:

(Beginning just behind the Gate)

We are here now at the end of our Day in Oswiecim/Auschwitz, to commemorate and honour the victims – men, women, children who were tortured and murdered here – and to confirm our obligation to work for peace, justice and reconciliation.

Our way along the ramp in the Birkenau Camp – from the entrance gate to the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria – follows the last way of most of the Auschwitz victims.

On our way we will make four stations, and we will end with a silent ceremony at the memorial.

STATION I – The Righteous

(Same place)

The victims left behind their whole world, family, friends, and neighbours. Often many of them were also persecuted and killed, particularly all of the Jews.

On the outside were the perpetrators, who made the decisions, searched, arrested and sent the victims here.

The majority didn't do anything, sometimes out of fear and helplessness, sometimes out of lack of interest, sometimes with silent agreement.

But others on the outside tried to help, often risking their lives.

Let's have a special look at the heroic righteous and at the perpetrators. These represent the best and the worst of what human beings are capable of doing.

In memory of the righteous

We offer an example from here, from Oswiecim /Auschwitz.

Merka Szewach, Jewish former woman prisoner, recalls:

“I met Janek in B Lager in Birkenau, in the "Czech camp" as they called it. I was in very bad shape at the time, mortally starved, sick, and terrified by the horrible conditions, beyond hoping for any kind of help or salvation in this inhuman situation.

When I arrived in Auschwitz, I had already been through the ghetto in Białystok and a transport to Treblinka that never reached its destination because of the mutiny by the prisoners there. They sent the transport to Majdanek, and then to Bliżyn, near Skarżysko. I arrived in Auschwitz after two years of suffering and wandering.

Janek worked in the camp as an electrician. He worked with two other Poles. He was about 22. He took an interest in my tragic fate, and was very sympathetic and wanted to help. He lived with his parents in the town of Oświęcim.

There were four of us, camp-sisters and friends: Lubka, Jetka, Liska, and me, Merka. We had been stripped of all dignity under those nightmarish conditions, and had lost our loved ones. We decided to share everything we had, and above all to keep each other's spirits up.

Janek was touched to the quick by our misery. He brought us food, cigarettes (to trade for bread), items of apparel, and even brought me high boots, all ... at great risk.

I will never forget how Janek smuggled in yeast, which was the camp medicine for boils ... and skin conditions, and which saved Lubka, because it removed the pus from her open sores and enabled her to make it through the next selection ... Janek, with whom I made friends on that "Other Planet," prepared an escape plan for me in cooperation with his parents. At that very moment, however, they transferred us to another camp in Birkenau.... where he had no access, and so we lost contact with each other.

I looked for him after the war, trying to find any trace of him so that I could thank him for having passed his examination in humanity during the "Time of Contempt," and for risking his life to be so good and understanding to me, and to help me without hope of gain. Unfortunately, I never found him, and never had the opportunity to tell him how much I appreciated his courage, which made such a big difference to my survival.”¹

Prayer/ Meditation

אב הרחמים

**אב הרחמים שוכן מרום ברחמים. ברחמיו העצומים הוא 'פקוד ברחמים היסוד' והשר'מ והתמ'מ. קהלות
הקדש שמסרו נפשם על קדשת השם. הנאהב'ם והנע'מ'ם בח'הם ובמותם לא נפרד. מנשר'ם קלו
ומאר'ות גברו לעשות רצון קונם והפץ צורם. 'זכרם אלה'מו לטובה עם שאר צד'ק' עולם.**

Father of Mercies, who dwells on high, in His mighty compassion, remember those loving, upright and blameless ones, the holy congregation, who laid down their lives for the sanctification of the Divine Name, who were loving and pleasant in their lives and in their death were not divided, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions to do the will of their Master and the desire of their Rock. May our God remember them for good with all the righteous people of the world.

May we learn from the inspiring example of the Righteous among all the nations and see them as our role models for leading a holy life. We pray that our courage and fortitude never be tested as were theirs, but if we ever are so tested, may we be proven worthy of their memory.

May all their souls be bound up in the bond of eternal life, and let us say, Amen.

Let's move from here to the watchtower.

(2 min. walk)

¹ Letter written by Merka Szewach (now Miriam Jahav), former prisoner no. A 15755. Source: APMA-B, Statements Collection, vol. 160, pp. 70-72. Published in: People of Good Will. Edited by: Henryk Świebocki. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim 2009.

STATION II – The perpetrators

(Under the first watchtower)

We need also to think about the perpetrators.

Elżbieta Piotrowska wrote a poem with the title "The Interrogation". She asks:

Who killed you children?

Humans.

What were these humans like? Did they have faces like ghosts? Did they have eyes like animals? [...]

No they were ordinary people, like other people with human eyes and teeth. [...]

Maybe they were born of a volcano? Maybe they didn't have a mother?

Human mothers gave birth to these people. [...]

Did they have any children?

Yes, they wrote letters to them. They sent them parcels with shoes in them.

How did these people kill you?

They suffocated us with gas, they threw us in the fire, they threw us against a wall, they kicked us with their boots, and if they were good they shot us.

And when they had killed you, what did they do then?

They wiped away the sweat on their forehead with a white cloth and said: Today we worked hard! It was exhausting, so many small children! ²

Manfred:

Who were these people who had lost all humanity? And why did this happen?

They were from Germany. I am from Germany. Most of them were baptised. I'm a Catholic priest.

I'm not personally guilty, but I am very sad about what happened, and that my people did this. I feel the deep wounds we caused to others, to you and your families, and to the relationships between us and our peoples, and I am very very sorry.

Deep in my heart I hope and want to beg you for a renewed human, friendly, trusting and loving relationship.

² Elżbieta Piotrowska, The Interrogation. Fragments of the poem from the cycle "A visit to the Scene of Crime, Auschwitz". In: The Auschwitz Poems. Ed. By A. Zych. Oswiecim 2011, s. 322n.

Once I asked Halina Birenbaum, a child survivor of Majdanek and Birkenau, what she would like to say on such an occasion as this. She recommended the following text, found in a German concentration camp:

“Peace to all people of bad will! May revenge cease... the crimes have gone beyond all measure. There are too many martyrs... Lord, do not weigh their sufferings by the weight of your justice, and do not blame the oppressors for these sufferings, do not force them to pay this terrible debt. May they pay in another way.

May all the executioners of crimes, informers, traitors, and all people of bad will, be enriched by the courage of others, their spiritual strength, humility, dignity, their persistent inner struggle, unbroken hope, the smiles which dried tears, love, their broken hearts which endure strong and trusting even in the face of death, even in moments of greatest weakness... May all of this be offered to you, Lord, for the forgiveness of sinners, as a ransom for the victory of the just; may good and not evil be counted!

May we remain in the memories of our enemies not as their victims, their nightmares, phantoms following their footsteps, but as those who help them overcome their murderous passions. We want nothing more than that from them. And when this is all over, may we live as people among people and may peace return to our poor earth – peace for people of good will and for all others...”³

Let’s go from here to the middle of the ramp, to the selection side.

(7 min. walk)

³ The text was found after the war in the concentration camp Ravensbrück, written by an unknown prisoner on a piece of wrapping paper. Translation into English: Anna Zubrzycki

STATION III – The Camp inmates

(Middle of ramp – selection side)

From 1940 about 400,000 registered prisoners were sent into the Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

From the very beginning Poles were sent here: soldiers, resistance and national leadership, among them 400 priests and religious persons. Of the 150,000 Polish prisoners half died in the Camp.

In 1941 about 15,000 Soviet Prisoners arrived, almost all of them died.

From 1943 on about 23,000 so called Gypsies, Sinti and Roma arrived 21,000 of them died.

Many others - non Jewish groups from different countries were deported to Auschwitz, mainly connected to resistance movements, but also Jehovah Witnesses and homosexuals.

1942 the Jewish transports from all over Europe arrived. While the majority went directly to the gas chambers, the young and strong were selected to work. About 200,000 Jews were sent into the Camp, half died there.

Primo Levi, a survivor, remembered:

“There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets... Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor can it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we are, still remains....”⁴

⁴ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, pp 26-27. Touchstone NY 1993

But Auschwitz was not only a place of defeated humanity.

In 1979 Pope John Paul II said here:

“In this site of the terrible slaughter that brought death to so many people of different nations, Father Maximilian voluntarily offered himself for death in the starvation bunker for a brother, and so won a spiritual victory like that of Christ himself. [...]

How many other similar victories were here? There were people of different faiths, different ideologies, certainly not only believers. We want to embrace with a feeling of deepest reverence each of these victories, every manifestation of humanity, which was a denial of the system of systematic denial of humanity...”

OUR FATHER

Someone once said that this prayer could have been composed in a concentration camp. With these words Christians and Jews can pray.

**“Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.”**

From here on we will join the way of the majority of the victims of Auschwitz, who weren't even prisoners, who went directly from the train wagons to the gas chambers. We'll go in silence.

(7 min.)

STATION IV – The Shoah

(Between the Crematoria)

Most victims of Auschwitz never became prisoners in the camp. About 900,000 Jews were directly transported to the gas chambers and killed there. Later their corpses, like the corpses of the other prisoners, were burnt and their ashes thrown away. This became the Symbol for the Shoah, this was the Shoah.

From the notes of Salmen Levental,
a member of the Sonderkommando who was forced to work at the gas chambers,
found after the war:

“Calamity, misfortune. Such feelings gnawed at every one of us. Everybody had such thoughts. We were ashamed and didn’t dare to look into each other’s eyes. Every one fled into a corner, out of pain, shame and weeping with swollen eyes, in order to avoid any encounter.”

Once, when several hundred naked, emaciated women were thrown down from trucks in ice-cold weather in front of the crematorium, Levental described the following scene:

“One of us, who stood apart on the side, seeing the enormous misfortune of these defenceless, tortured souls couldn’t take it any longer and started to weep. Then a young girl cried out: ‘Look, what I can still experience before my death: an expression of compassion and tears shed about our horrible fate. Here, in the camp of murderers, where one is torturing and beating people until death, here, where one can see murders and falling victims, where people have lost any feeling for the greatest calamity, here, where all human feelings have been numbed, here, when your brother or sister is falling down in front of you and you can’t even give them a sigh of farewell, here a human being has been found who takes to heart our terrible misfortune and expresses his compassion by weeping. Oh, something wonderful, something supernatural! Tears and sighs of a living human being accompany us into death. There is somebody who will weep for us.’”⁵

⁵ Salmen Lewental notebook in: Bezwinska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Members of Sonderkommando, Auschwitz-Oswiecim 1973*, pages 142-5.

EL MALE RACHAMIM

for the Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust

אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים, המצא מנוחה נכונה תחת פנפי השכינה, במעלות קדושים וטהורים כזוהר הרקיע מזהירים, לנשמות ששנת מיליוני היהודים, חללי השואה באירופה, אנשים נשים וטף, שנשחטו, ונשחטו, ונשרפו ונשנהרגו על קידוש השם באושוויץ... בידי המרצחים הגרמנים ועוזריהם משאר העמים. בעבור שאנו מתפללים לעילוי נשמותיהם. לכן בעל הרחמים נסתירם בסתר פנפיו לעולמים, ונצרו בצרור החיים את נשמותיהם, ה' הוא נחלתם, בגן עדן תהא מנוחתם, ויגוחו בשלום על פזורי משפכם, ויעמדו לגורלם לקץ הימיו, ונ' אמר אמן

God, full of mercy, who dwells in the heights, grant proper rest, beneath the wings of the Divine Presence, in the great heights of the holy and pure, who like the brilliance of the heavens shine, to all the souls of the six million Jews, men, women, boys and girls, victims of the European Holocaust, who were murdered, slaughtered, burnt and exterminated in Auschwitz, ... in sanctification of God's Name, at the hands of the German Nazi murderers and their assistants from other nations. Therefore may the Master of mercy shelter them in the shelter of His wings for eternity, and bind their souls with the bond of life, the Lord is their inheritance, may the Garden of Eden be their resting place, and may they find peaceful repose in their resting places, and may they stand for their destiny in the end of days, and let us say: Amen

KADDISH

**May the Great Name whose Desire gave birth to the Universe
Resound through the Creation Now.
May this Great Presence rule your life and your day and all lives of our world.
And say, yes. Amen.**

**Throughout all Space, Bless, Bless this Great Name, throughout all Time
Though we bless, we praise, we beautify, we offer up your Name, Name That Is
Holy, Blessed One,
Still you remain beyond the reach of our praise, our song, beyond the reach of all
consolation. Beyond! Beyond!
And say, yes. Amen.**

**Let God's Name give birth to Great Peace and Life for us and all people
And say, yes. Amen.**

**The One who has given a universe of Peace gives peace to us, to All that is Israel.
And say, yes Amen.**

FINAL CEREMONY

(In front of the Memorial –same place as St. IV)

We are together here today, from different backgrounds, but united in our commemoration of the victims and in our consciousness of obligation to engage for a better Future, in which we really can all live together as brothers and sisters.

As a sign of our commemoration, prayer and commitment we will now in silence put candles down at the memorial.

After that we will return to our busses.