

I'VE BEEN TO EARTH'S HELL-HOLES

PAGE 1 Auschwitz-Birkenau

I have stood at the concentration camps of Dachau, Mauthausen, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbruck. However, nothing has gripped me like Auschwitz. So many of my Jewish friends, survivors of the Holocaust, remember the hell that was Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Sonia Weitz, Jack Kornhauser, Shony Alex and Shari Braun—Norma and I saw their faces even as we started our drive north from Budapest, Hungary, to Krakow, Poland. The killing field of Auschwitz-Birkenau is only a two hour drive from Krakow. All our senses came to full alert on that drive as we viewed settings little changed from fifty years ago when Jews and others made the same journey—to their deaths.

Our diary quickly filled with feelings and discoveries: “Little and large churches. Did any speak up for the victims passing through? Sleepy villages, haystacks, cows grazing—just like fifty years ago. Signs cautioning of deer crossing but no call for care when people were gassed. Such a good road to Auschwitz for tourists—only those ugly railroad tracks for Jews.”

More notes: “Fog and wind and the day grows more gray as we near Auschwitz. Polish children going to school; pretty flowers; shrines along the road; bars on the main street as we come into the town, women talking. Some things never change.”

“Fuel trucks rolling into Auschwitz. Now they warm houses and people. Fifty years ago they burned Jews. Four-legged sheep graze peacefully today—while two legged sheep lived and died in tormented fear at Auschwitz. An old man on a bicycle. What could he tell me? Did he know? Did he care? We cross a bridge. Friendly enough today—a bridge to hell fifty years ago. Our car stops as a passenger train goes by. We study faces peering through windows. How many eyes stared out then from cattle cars. Who stared back? What's that? A huge, smoking chimney. Today its odor is of Polish industry—fifty years ago the smell of burning flesh wafted for miles.

More diary notes: “We're at the gate—those mocking words Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Makes Free) hanging over the entrance. Johann Kremer, a S.S. doctor, noted in his diary the terrible truth, ‘At 3 o'clock was for the first time present at a

special action.’ Compared with it, Dante’s Inferno seems almost a comedy. No wonder Auschwitz is called an extermination camp...” The sensitive can still smell it. Death hangs in the air. No single place on earth is like Konzentrationslager Auschwitz- Birkenau where four million human beings perished—90% of them Jews.

We had prayed for the right guide. God answered with Christina, a 42 year old Polish woman whose father-in-law had been taken to Auschwitz for giving bread to starving Jews. “He was only 18 when they released him,” she said, but he looked like an old man.” He died at 42—still suffering the effects of torture. Christina, who lived in the town of Auschwitz, vowed to never let people forget and kept that promise by acting as a guide at Auschwitz.

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PAGE 2 "The Children Were So Pretty..."

The museum defies description. Prisoners were gassed at Crematorium I in Auschwitz and four large gas chambers at Birkenau, three kilometers from Auschwitz. Then the 128 corpses were exploited. We stared in disbelief at Block 4, Room 5—an entire room filled with human hair—only a remnant which the Nazis had not managed to send to the Bavarian factories for 50 pfennig per kilogram. And rooms filled with dentures (gold was extracted from the dead), shaving brushes, tooth brushes, thousands of pairs of shoes including children's shoes, each pair or single shoe evidence of a murdered victim. The viewer is speechless.

In spite of Nazi perfection of utmost secrecy, a jar buried underground was found with notes describing the atrocities. Mention was made of the killing of children, "The children were so pretty...so well-made, that it was striking when compared with the rags they were covered with. It happened in the second half of October 1944...The children had noticed the smoke from the chimney and they realized they were being led to their death. They began running hither and thither in the yard, in a dead fright, clutching their heads in despair."

Christina took us slowly to the building where ghastly experiments were conducted on living souls by Professor Dr. Carl Clauberg and other S.S. doctors. Then to Block 11—the "Block of Death"—where at least 20,000 prisoners were shot under "the wall of death." The earth, mixed forever with blood, whispered, "Never forget."

One of the most moving moments took place at the torture cells where prisoners were starved to death or forced to stand day and night in tiny, nearly airless concrete closets.

One of those prisoners was Maximilian Kolbe. After a prisoner escaped, the S.S. selected ten men for execution. One, a husband and father of six children, pled to be spared. Kolbe, a Catholic priest, asked the Nazi leader to take his life instead, since he was alone, and allow the man to live. His bold request was granted. Kolbe starved to death in a cell forever hallowed by God's grace and courage exhibited in this man. The man whose place he took survived the war.

I asked Christina if the people outside the camps knew of the hopeless multitudes being slaughtered. She didn't flinch with her answer. "Of course they knew."

Prisoners even worked in the fields and factories outside the perimeter. People knew.”

Yes, people knew. By 1944, everybody knew—Germans, Poles, and Americans residing in the White House and State Department. Everyone knew. Few had the courage to act. Everybody knows today, too, including those who say Auschwitz-Birkenau “never happened.” But there’s a difference. Now I know about Auschwitz. And you know, too. We can do more than weep over the past. We can act to prevent an “Auschwitz present” by refusing to allow neighbors—Jew or Gentile—to remain strangers to us. Or to allow hate—the slightest tinge of bigotry—to be directed against our neighbor without our rising to stop it!

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PAGE 3 Heartbreak at Treblinka

It may qualify as “the second bloodiest place on planet earth”—after Auschwitz/Birkenau. But nothing exceeds the sheer ferocity with which hundreds of thousands of human beings perished at Treblinka.

It was a pleasant July day as Norma and I set out from Warsaw, Poland, to the village of Treblinka, two hours northeast of the Polish capital and near the Soviet border. Leaving the main road for the final lap to the village, we ended up at a road-block and washed-out bridge. From then on, not speaking Polish and using only one word “Treblinka,” we trusted the finger-pointings of Poles who directed us through a maze of deep-rutted dirt roads winding through farmers’ fields. Finally we ended up back on asphalt and a few moments later saw the sign leading to the entrance of the former Treblinka death factory.

The soil of Treblinka conceals the ashes of 800,000 people—most of them Jews—from ten European countries. No death camp, not even Auschwitz, operated with more perfection than Treblinka I and Treblinka II. Thirteen gas chambers functioned to handle the rail transports of victims arriving from July, 1942, until the shutting down of Treblinka in August, 1943. Here people had only moments to live, from the time they arrived at the make-believe railway station (signs seemingly pointing toward waiting rooms, cafeterias and ticket offices) until they realized they were being driven to gas chambers.

Here also perished 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto, including Janusz Korczak. I first heard of Dr. Korczak, a Polish Jew, from a Polish evangelical bishop who cried when he recalled the story. Korczak ran separate Jewish and Christian orphanages. When the Nazis destroyed and occupied Warsaw, he was left with only the Jewish children. Then Dr. Korczak was ordered to remain in Warsaw while the children were removed to Treblinka.

The good man knew the children would be killed and insisted he could not leave them. Pretending they were all going on an outing, Dr. Korczak accompanied his orphans to Treblinka. They perished together. A stone engraved with his name honors the memory of this man who loved others more than life.

A bus arrived filled with American Jews. We walked with them and began conversing quietly. Some of these few survivors of Treblinka had not been back for nearly fifty years. A woman said, “My husband and I are old now. We figured it

was now or never. We thought time would change how it was. But..." Norma's arm slipped around the woman's shoulders as she broke down in tears. The Jewish group kept whispering and pointing us out to others with, "They're not Jews. But they fight antisemitism in America. They care!"

We were given an eerie invitation at Treblinka, "Come back in the spring. Every spring the rains uncover more bones."

My wife and I drove away from Treblinka heart-broken. The evidence is still there. So are the villagers, none of whom deny the impossibly hideous happenings at Treblinka. Only in Anaheim is the Holocaust denied—not Auschwitz; only in Torrance—not Treblinka. And so we take to others our heartbreak at Treblinka, driven by the echo of the words, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

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PAGE 4 The Lessons of Auschwitz and Treblinka

The Bible—both Testaments—speak openly of Satan as the adversary of God. But it's how Satan appears that I find so illuminating. He does not confront people as some salivating multi-headed ogre but as an attractive seducer to Eve and an angel of light as described by Paul.

So it is that I found at Auschwitz and Treblinka the maddening realization that the slaughter of Jews and others did not occur in desolate regions away from the eyes and ears of normal people but right in the midst of towns, villages and business-as-usual. Six lessons lodged in my mind:

- 1) How hell can look so normal. Inside walls and barbed wire, gas chambers enveloped screaming humans and chimneys belched their remains heavenward. But outside the walls, people who knew still ate, drank, kissed their children, enjoyed conjugal relations, and picked up paychecks.
- 2) How people can be made to do anything—just by making it “the law.” Nazis could kill Jews as a “moral service.” Christians could misquote Romans 13 as God having put Hitler in authority to be obeyed. People chosen to live could tattle on others chosen to die and then “legally” take over houses and businesses of the unfortunate victims whom they knew as “neighbors.”
- 3) How men and women of normal conscience can be rendered mute—powerless—under an airless canopy of total power where those who choose to speak out against evil don't generally die as visible martyrs but simply disappear as invisible “fools”—their courage and heroism known only to God.
- 4) How the past affects the present. A German Christian told me, “First we Germans knew the humiliation of Versailles when the victorious allies rubbed our noses in the dirt after World War I. Then we were bled white as those victors put on us impossible repayment demands. A man appeared who promised us self-respect and material needs. We were willing to give Hitler the chance.”
- 5) How normal people can be turned into monsters to be feared by other normal people. First Jews were pointed out as “different,” then “dangerous,” then “deadly,” and finally rendered dead.

6) How appeasement of evil paves roads that lead to places like Auschwitz and Treblinka. The West could have crushed Hitler's first move on Czechoslovakia. It didn't. My German friend admitted, "Once the Nazi party hurt or killed ten Jews, we should have risen against Hitler." They didn't. Human nature always answers God's pointed question, "Where is your brother?" with a disdainful "Am I my brother's keeper?" And such disdain never hears God's roar from heaven, "YES, YOU ARE YOUR BROTHER'S KEEPER!"

Six lessons. The world has never learned them. The Church has yet to learn them. And precious, irreplaceable human beings continue to suffer and die because of such failure.

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PAGE 5 Poems From The Front Lines

Two thousand years after the initial coming of the Price of Peace, the nations explode in limited but horrifying wars. Israel, a modern miracle of rebirth, stands so alone. Jews and other people-groups yet face persecution. And many Christians still fail to get it—that to remain neutral when others suffer as victims of hate is to deny the person and teaching of Jesus Christ and be in silent league with the enemy. I shall close this program with my thoughts through rhyme. My poems are about events of 50 years ago. But what about today? Have we learned the lessons of history? Or are we doomed to repeat them?

A WORLD GONE MAD

I see them come to my home
With loud knocks at my door;
Then I open to hatred,
It's no use to implore.

My wife's face shows her fright,
How I ache for my child;
I try to give comfort,
So I force a brave smile.

Streets seem so deserted,
And our friends now so few;
They turn their backs on us,
Just because we are Jews.

My child cries "Daddy,
Please don't leave me alone;"
So I hug her and kiss her,
Then she's gone—and I groan.

I see them walk slowly,
Then they're forced on a train;
Now I'm packed in like cattle,
Will I see them again?

That hated yellow star,
We Jews are forced to wear;
And a twisted Nazi cross,
Does anybody care?

There's Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen,
Dachau—to name a few;
Those hell-holes that are whispered,
As death camps for a Jew.

I see chimneys smoking,
What is that awful smell?
If we Jews are placed in there,
This world has turned to hell.

Where are the Christian voices?
Where is the statesman's shout?
I thought the love of neighbor,
Was what it's all about.

Why do I hear but curses,
As if I'm something bad;
And as a Jew, die all alone,
In a world that's gone mad?

LOVE IS MORE THAN JUST A WORD

“Why don't the Jews believe in Christ?”
I oft hear Christians say;
And preachers long the pulpits pound,
That Jews have lost the way.

“We have the promise—they the curse”
Is called “theology,”
With Jews accused of killing Christ,
And more indignities.

We claim to know a God of love,

But is that really true;
When He asked us to remember,
Yet we forget the Jew?

We praise the Hebrew Scriptures,
That speak of God's great care;
We extol the Jew named Jesus,
And how His life we share.

But what of those
Through whom Christ came?
Are we afraid to show,
We ought to be the Jews' best friends,
For all the world to know?

When hate is aimed their way we bring,
No comfort for their pain;
We go to church and sing our songs,
While Jews still cry in vain.

Just look at centuries past and see,
Our record and its blight;
Times haven't really changed that much,
We haven't seen the light.

For Jews still suffer vicious hate,
And think they're all alone;
While we the Church yet fail to give,
The love Christ would have shown.

But God won't throw the Jews away,
Though we His followers try;
And forever He will call them,
The "apple of His eye."

Though we ignore the debt we owe,
And fail to take a stand;
God guards the Jews and says they are,
Engraven on His hand.

If only we would check our roots,
We'd find it's really true,
The greatest way to grieve our Lord,
Is to forget the Jew.

For love was surely more than words,
When God reached me—and you;
It's time His Church repents and sees,
The care we owe the Jew.