

August 18, 2002

Anguished Cries In a Place of Silence

By LYNN SHERR

Correction Appended

IT was smaller than I'd imagined, a black iron portal of human dimensions rather than the monstrous symbol of terror it has become. But the cynical words arching overhead, "ARBEIT MACHT FREI," or "Work Makes You Free," transported me directly into the footsteps of those who had once shuffled into Auschwitz with no hope of leaving alive. Our guide pointed to the handmade sign: "Look at the 'B' in "ARBEIT," he said. "It's upside down. A prisoner's rebellion -- a sign of resistance." It was one of the only moments of triumph for the next five and a half hours.

I had come to Auschwitz to pay my respects, to touch the horror I had been spared only because my grandparents left Poland when the tyrant was the Czar, not Hitler. I went home convinced that everyone ought to visit. To feel. To bear witness. To preserve the lesson.

The death camp known during World War II as Konzentrationslager Auschwitz I is today Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, a sprawling monument to Nazi depravity and global neglect in southern Poland. This complex was the largest of the lagers, ultimately encompassing a chain of subcamps, and was responsible for the systematic murders of nearly 1.5 million people, almost all Jews, from the day it opened in June 1940 until the Soviet liberation in January 1945. Now it is less a tourist spot than a pilgrimage site for an estimated half a million visitors a year. Poles, Americans and Germans are the most numerous; many visitors are Jews, looking for traces of lost relatives or, like me, for a moment to mourn. Groups of German schoolchildren also come, to help maintain the museum by cutting the grass and doing other odd jobs as volunteers. "It is very hard for the German kids," the museum's Polish deputy director, Krystyna Oleska, told me in an interview before my tour.

I started my trip in Krakow, where my companions hired a car and driver for the 45-minute drive southwest, mostly on the well-maintained A-4 toll road through gentle hills and past small brick houses. The ordinariness was jarring: taking a taxi to a concentration camp on a gorgeous, warm day last August. But when we passed the first set of railroad tracks, my blood ran cold. That was how prisoners arrived 60 years ago. In fact, the camp was built

here precisely because of the conjunction of major railroad lines in the town of Oswiecim, which the Third Reich renamed Auschwitz after occupying Poland in 1939.

My first impression of the camp itself was its vastness -- nearly 50 acres of barracks, barbed wire, watch towers and a crematorium, all still menacing despite decades of abandonment. I fell uncharacteristically silent. And I wasn't the only one. There were several large groups there when I visited -- Japanese tourists and French boy scouts among them. Few were laughing or posing.

Instead, we proceeded along the neat rows of barracks, or blocks, with their exhibits on camp life. And death. The blocks themselves are red brick, two-story buildings, each designed to house 700 prisoners. In reality, each held up to 2,000, crammed so tight on concrete floors that at night, according to our guide, "when one turned, all had to turn." The toilets were lidless and doorless; the sinks, long troughs. This was where the lucky ones lived, or rather existed, while they worked in the fields or factories nearby.

I thought of the words of Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer who spent nearly a year here: "It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so."

One display shows the variety of tattoos used at Auschwitz, the only camp to use them; another, the train tickets the Nazis sold (yes, sold) to prisoners for their trip to the camp. An immense array of prison cards (häftlingskarten) listed not only a person's name and usual statistics, but also the shape of his or her face (including eyes, nose, ears, teeth and lips) and the reason for the arrest. One poor soul's offense was "helping Jews"; another's, "listening to foreign radio station."

The Nazi compulsion to document atrocities is stunning, the deceit infuriating. Death records for Russian prisoners of war -- exterminated for being soldiers, not Jews -- are recorded in black ink with a steady hand, noting precisely the time of execution: 8 p.m., 8:05, 8:10, 8:45. One book records the names of 22,000 Gypsy victims, including their children born at Auschwitz. A postcard to the Red Cross from a Czech Jew -- forced to write in German -- reads: "I am in good health, I feel good."

And then there is the hair. On the second floor of Block 4, in a case some 20 yards long, are layer after layer of braids and tresses and curls, all gone gray now but once blond and brown and black and auburn. The hair weighs more than two tons, less than a third of what the

Allied troops originally found. Hair was sold to be woven into textiles; gold fillings from teeth went to the German treasury.

Each display was more dreadful than the last, but the one that hit me hardest was the suitcases: a room-length mound of leather and cardboard valises once packed with the illusion that the owners were headed for a place where they could use their belongings. Names and statistics were carefully lettered outside with what looked like white shoe polish: "L. Bermann, 26.12.1886, Hamburg." As if poor Mr. Bermann ever would see his bag, or his world, again. "Sometimes visitors say, 'That's my father,' " our guide told me. I scanned the mass of lost hopes and stopped short at a brown leather valise, with the name "Petr Eisler, KIND," meaning child. Petr's birth date was two days from my own.

As we were led from building to building along the wide, deceptively tranquil roads of the camp on this gloriously sunny day, I recognized the incongruities. The lawn was too lush ("If there had been grass, the starving prisoners would have eaten it," our guide said) and it was peaceful. The crematorium, with its tracks for the smooth delivery of bodies to ovens, has been restored. There is no shortage of grisly reminders, like Block 11 with its one-foot-square "standing cell" and its suffocating starvation cell, torturous punishment for disobedient prison laborers. A placard points out that Jakob Rosenzweig spent five nights here because he was "talking during work." Still, it's tidy -- put in order -- after all, a museum. "Auschwitz has a certain progression," explained one of my companions, a rabbi based in Warsaw, ushering me back into the taxi after three hours for the next part of our visit. "But Birkenau gets right away to the bones."

Birkenau is shorthand for KL Auschwitz II, built as an expansion to the main camp in 1941 in the nearby village of Brzezinka, a quick, two-mile drive.

Birkenau is where it all began and ended; where you stepped out of your boxcar and faced a lineup of storm troopers and snarling dogs and where one man would decide whether you lived temporarily or died immediately. It was called the Selection. You've no doubt seen the photographs -- the ones with the Nazi officer pointing to the right (forced labor) or left (gas chamber), taking lives and splitting families. It's where Sophie had to make her unbearable choice.

I walked down the tracks in utter silence. This camp, nearly 10 times the size of Auschwitz, has largely been left as it was, an eerie ghost town spread across an immense field with the remains of four gas chambers and crematoriums, and a sickeningly efficient reception area

called the sauna, where prisoners chosen for forced labor were shaved, stripped and hosed down.

There are also rows of squalid barracks -- one-story structures originally designed as stables, with 52 rings for horses still on the wall. They housed up to 1,000 humans each. Here the toilets were buckets, the beds triple-tiered shelves where the people were stacked like goods in a warehouse. Finally I understood the photographs of the liberation: this is where the men, or women, lay staring out at their rescuers, human cordwood too feeble to move.

The ovens they'd escaped are not intact. Unlike the restoration at Auschwitz, some are in clumps, ruins left by the SS when they blew them up in an attempt to destroy all evidence before retreating. Another was partly destroyed by Jewish prisoners, who somehow managed to marshal the strength of the powerless during a 1944 revolt. An enlarged photograph by the rubble puts it back together.

Even the ground at Birkenau is authentic -- so thoroughly saturated with the remains of the prisoners' bodies, I was warned to be careful where I walked. "The ashes were dumped in the pond," I was told, "but in fact the ashes are all around here." I heard about visitors who found bits of bones in the soil sticking up near the footpaths.

Finally, at the far end of the grounds, we reached the memorial -- a line of plaques unveiled in 1967 with the same message in 19 languages. It reads in part: "Forever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity." That thought was echoed in my introductory conversation with Krystyna Olesky, the deputy director who has worked there for 20 years. Yes, she told me, it is difficult "but someone has to do it." Why? "Because of all of those who died here."

She described the staff efforts to catalog prison records into a new database, to shore up the crumbling buildings, to repair the damage from acid rain, paid for mostly by international contributions organized by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation.

"This is an extraordinary cemetery, the scene of a crime," she told me. "We could flatten everything, let the grass grow, and we would have in some sense fulfilled that need to commemorate. But history teaches us. The maintenance of historical knowledge is our obligation. This must never happen again."

I left feeling drained and shaken but curiously satisfied. I had wanted to see Auschwitz with my own eyes, not because I doubted its existence or expected to make sense of it, but to make it part of my life. "No one who has not experienced the event will ever be able to

understand it," wrote Elie Wiesel, the Nobelist who survived Auschwitz. Primo Levi described winter in Auschwitz, when an icicle he'd broken off was snatched away.

"Why?" he asked his tormentor, who replied, "There is no why here."