My Holocaust Journey

If his study of the Holocaust taught him anything, Mr. Glanz says, it is that each of us in our own way must do something. Whether it entails becoming more religious, studying martial arts, becoming more politically active, confronting racism and bigotry directly, or teaching others about the Holocaust and its consequences, we must do something.

BY JEFFREY GLANZ

MY FATHER, Eliasz David Glanz, was a survivor of the Mauthausen concentration camp, which was located in Austria. He was held captive there during that shameful period of human history known as the Holocaust. As his only son, born five years after the end of World War II, I witnessed the tortured moments he spent attempting

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Illustration by Kay Salem

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to put aside the memories of his horrific experiences. I saw him do this on a daily basis. I can recall waking in the middle of the night to hear his groans.

"*Oy vey is mir.*" ("Oh woe is me.")

The next morning, I asked my American-born mother, "Is daddy all right?"

She responded timidly, "He's okay. He had just a bit too much to eat last night."

I silently wondered how a man who was not at all heavy could continually complain about eating too much.

During the first 15 years of my life, my father never spoke about his experiences. Many years later, I discovered that he was silent because he "wanted to spare his children from knowing about his pain and suffering." (I have one sister who is four years my junior.)

I vividly recall being left alone one Sunday afternoon while my parents attended a wedding. My father had previously warned me, "*Macht nischt oif des shif ladel.*" (Roughly translated, "Don't open the top drawer of the armoire.") Although I had always heeded such admonitions in the past, this opportunity was too tempting for a 14-year-old to ignore.

Under pairs of socks, I found a large brown manila envelope bursting at its seams. I poured the contents of the envelope onto the bed and was astonished as I gazed at pictures too horrific to describe. Aside from photos of emaciated, emasculated corpses, I saw photographs of a wraith whom I could only presume to be my father. He was just faintly recognizable, given his gaunt, almost ghostly appearance. After gazing at these photographs for nearly half an hour, I hurriedly placed them back in the envelope and returned it to the drawer beneath the socks. I wondered what those pictures were all about, but I never mentioned a word to anyone.

Within the past 15 years or so, survivors of the Holocaust have become more inclined to talk about their suffering under the Nazis. I believe that my father's willingness to discuss his experiences was prompted by Steven Spielberg's epic film *Schindler's List*. After he saw this moving and accurate portrayal of the experiences of some of the victims of the Holocaust, he began to discuss openly what he had witnessed and experienced. I learned more about my father's early life while listening to the stories he told to my children than I had in all the years of growing up in his household. I believe his reminiscences were a catharsis for him.

Not all survivors, however, can be as open. Both my in-laws are survivors of Auschwitz. They refuse to say anything about that era other than to explain, "It was all too horrible. Words can't describe . . ." "Enough . . . we are in America now." Although I respect their refusal to share their experiences, I also believe that those who are willing to discuss what happened immeasurably benefit those who search desperately for meaning in this dark chapter of our recent history.

I am not yet a scholar of Holocaust studies, but I am a professor of education, and I have been inevitably drawn to those tragic times. For the past few years, I have been trying to apply whatever expertise I have developed to teach about the Holocaust to teachers. I hope that these teachers can and will teach others about this period in world and Jewish history. Perhaps they can relate the Holocaust to the universality of human suffering and oppression. For me, teaching and writing about the Holocaust is a moral and personal imperative. It is my way of honoring my father and those others, living and dead, whose lives were forever defined by this event.

Early in 1998, I decided to retrace my father's early life and learn more about the Holocaust. So I prepared to set out on a journey that would take me to five major cities in three countries to visit five former ghettos, one concentration camp, one labor camp, six death camps, and one villa where the bureaucratic arrangements for the murder of 11 million Jews were made over lunch. I researched the dates, places, and events. I arranged my own self-guided tour, based on my studies. I was on the road and on my own for two and a half weeks in the places where it all happened.

Why did I go? I didn't go only because I am a Jew, although that would have sufficed. I didn't go only because I am associate director of the Holocaust Resource Center at Kean University, although that would have sufficed. I didn't go only because I teach a course titled "Teaching the Holocaust," although I will probably teach it better for having gone.

I went to more fully understand and confront certain issues that arose as I was growing up. My father, who passed on two years ago while sleeping in his bed on the eve of Yom Kippur, would have been happy and proud that I cared enough about him to learn more about his early life and about the ordeals he endured.

My father was a captive at the Mauthausen concentration camp. This was a slave labor camp, but the overall Weltanshauung of the criminals who operated the facility was the same as that of all their fellow Nazis, meaning that the ultimate product of their enterprise was dead Jews.

One day, my father told me, he was out in the fields breaking large stones with a dozen fellow inmates. He had awakened many hours earlier with a bout of diarrhea — not a good sign. At some point, he sneaked away to use the latrine.

While he was away, Mauthausen's commandant paid a visit to that area. In order to establish and display his absolute power and authority, he arbitrarily chose my father's group of workers and personally shot every one of them in plain sight of the entire group of inmates assembled.

Several minutes later, a truck (with my father in it) drove up. A henchman grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, threw him to the ground before the commandant, and pointed a pistol at his temple. Asked if he would like to shoot this *verdammte Jüde*, Herr Commandant replied, "Let him live so he will tell the others."

Were it not for that blessed attack of diarrhea, my father's life most assuredly would have been cut off at that point, as would have been my life, that of my sister, and those of my four and her two children. Perhaps there will be many lives over

many generations that will have been saved by the whim of that twisted commandant.

My Journey

My 16-hour-a-day journey was both physically exhausting and emotionally draining. Nonetheless, I found my pilgrimage spiritually uplifting. I returned knowing more, feeling enriched, and understanding myself as never before. Armed with a video camera, a new 35-mm single-lens reflex camera, and a trusty audiotape recorder (in which I kept an oral diary), I returned with enough information and insights to last me an entire lifetime.

What were some of my most memorable experiences? Flying Lufhansa Airways certainly was one. I enjoyed indescribable satisfaction from the Glatt Kosher meal, served by a beautiful blond-haired Aryan stewardess. I thought to myself, "Boy, if only Hitler could see this from his special corner of hell."

Hearing the German language spoken reminded me of my father's friend, another camp survivor, who complained, "My body quivers whenever I hear someone speak German."

Since I did not take a tour, I hired taxi drivers who spoke English to take me to various sites.

Prague

Prague is a charming, vibrant city that was once renowned as a rich and important Jewish cultural center. My taxi driver was both loquacious and polite. He kept insisting that women drivers should have their licenses forcibly revoked and that Gypsies are "nonproductive entities" that serve only as a drain on the government. That evening, I wrote in my diary, "I wonder what Gustav will have to say about this Jew he is chauffeuring around Prague?!"

I was awestruck by Theresienstadt, the first concentration camp I visited, and lamented the deceit of the Nazi regime. They had attempted to persuade a Red Cross delegation that the rooms they were shown, filled with mirrors and faucets, were actually used by inmates to "tidy up" after a long, hard day in the fields. The mirrors had been installed the day before the delegation arrived, and the faucets in the sink had no plumbing connections.

Later, I met two German college students who were also visiting Prague for the first time. They approached me and asked about Judaism. I asked why they were interested, and one explained that he had recently discovered that his father had been a Nazi sympathizer and an overt anti-Semite. Consequently, he himself had decided to convert to Judaism. "A lot of my friends have already converted. The guilt and shame we feel is too great to bear," he explained.

Cell Block 11 was particularly shocking. It was a barracks reserved for torture and executions.

Poland: The Overnight to Auschwitz

I took the overnight train to Auschwitz. I sat in my small compartment, gazing out the window, not really conscious of the trees and towns flying by. I thought how lucky I was to have such luxurious accommodations, although Polish trains leave much to be desired. Some five decades ago, my heritage would have earned me unreserved standing room in a cattle car, accompanied by several hundred other unfortunates, all crowded into the same cramped space. The railroad car would have been unheated, it would have lacked toilet facilities, and its floor would have reeked of human urine and feces after several days of travel. The terrified occupants of the cattle car would have heard rumors of their ultimate destination: Auschwitz, the dreaded death camp.

And so I sat, dozed, and drifted in and out of sleep. I could see the countryside of the 1940s. I could hear both the real and the ghostly clicking and clacking of wheels on steel. I could almost smell the stench of decades-old fear and dread. I could feel the half-century-old presence of my brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts — soon to be asphyxiated or shot and then cremated. Some portion of my being must have lived and died back then.

Then came the knock on the door. The border guard's knock caused such shock and consternation that my breathing became rapid and shallow and my heartbeat jumped completely off the charts. I pictured the Gestapo coming to take my father's parents away into the *nacht und knebel* (the night and the fog), never to be seen again among the living.

I was entering a full killing rage, as my martial arts background had trained me to do over the past 30 years. Then I heard the border guard's words, "You are entering Poland. Please present your passports." I complied gladly, but my spirit was still operating at a different, more primitive level. It took some time before I could see a color other than red.

Auschwitz

Auschwitz or Oświęcim — whatever the spelling, the evil and the horror still come across. This Polish town has become the symbol of six million martyrs and their forced martyrdom. Anticipating the terror that was Auschwitz must have been too much for a sane mind to bear. The mere thought of the malignant place must have brought many who were sent there past the point of madness, a perverse kindness if one considers what was to come. For me, passing under the entrance gate with its false message, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, was eerie beyond words.

The Auschwitz main camp was the primary site for the murder and torture of many thousands of Poles and Russian prisoners of war. It was surrounded by double rows of electrified fences and brick barracks, guarded by watchtowers with tripod-mounted machine guns. The barracks are now converted into museums filled with exhibits: piles of women's hair, thousands of pots and pans, heaps of clothing, suitcases with names still on them (Schmidt, Goldstein, Lobel, Cohen). My diary reads, "These belonged to real people. They could have been my relatives."

Cell Block 11 was particularly shocking. It was a death barracks reserved for torture and executions. The first tests using the gas Zyklon-B on Polish and Russian prisoners were conducted in the

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basement of this malevolent complex.

Yet the Auschwitz main camp is too bustling and museum-like in comparison to the terror of Auschwitz II, Birkenau. Birkenau is another universe: 450 acres and 300 massive buildings. It is the most notorious death camp. More than 1.2 million Jews were slaughtered here.

The story goes that Dr. Mengele would wait impatiently for new victims, all the while wringing his hands in the glass tower at the entrance of Birkenau. As I pass the "selection" point, I recall one of the few stories told me by my father-in-law. Survival in hell required proper deference to the devil himself. My father-in-law told me of his arrival at the camp. As he reached the spot at which Mengele would decide his immediate fate, my father-in-law ran up to where he was standing. Keeping his eyes averted, he bowed to the ground and kowtowed before the evil master of his future. The self-styled Angel of Death sent him to the right, the direction that kept him alive until the next crisis. As I walk alone in Birkenau, I am reminded of the horrors this quiet, ordinary man faced on a daily basis until he was ultimately liberated.

Kraków

This is one of Poland's oldest cities. This ancient, beautiful city with its Gothic architecture has remained intact, apparently untouched by the war. This is the first real city I visited in Poland, a land steeped in Jewish history. Some 3.2 million Jews lived in Poland at the beginning of World War II. This country was the birthplace of Chasidus (Hasidism). Some of the greatest Talmudic scholars of the past 50 years were educated in Poland. Yet, as I walk through Kraków, it is as if I am walking in a huge cemetery.

Kraków is a classic example of how the Nazi insanity operated. It took three steps to make an area *Jüdenrein*, purified of the very existence of Jews. First, herd the Jews into ghettos, where they can barely subsist in exceedingly cramped quarters, with reduced food and water rations, and under spirit-crushing conditions. Second, deport them to labor camps, where their spirits are further trampled and their bodies worked beyond exhaustion on exceedingly meager rations. Last, deport them to death centers. The entire process was intended to quell any feelings that might lead to attempts at self-defense or escape. It was a brilliant, albeit nefarious, strategy.

This three-stage process is evident in Kraków. First, the Jews were packed into a half-mile square area surrounded by a wall. Three families were assigned to a single apartment. A curfew was imposed on everyone. Punishment for infringements was harsh. Food rations were minimal. At any moment, a knock on the door could mean immediate death or deportation. It was commonplace for people walking down the street to be shot at the whim of a guard. This was especially the case when Ukrainian guards were nearby. "They could be more hate filled and brutal than the Nazis," my father told me.

A labor camp, Plaszow, was made infamous by the cruelties of its commandant, Amon Goeth, who was depicted in *Schindler's List*. When I visited the camp, I was shocked at the lush countryside and struggled to imagine what horrors had taken place more than half a century ago. People were frequently sent to Birkenau as their final destination.

Tarnów

A highlight of my trip, if you could call it such, was a visit to my father's hometown of Tarnów. It was once a bustling town with more than 25,000 Jews, where my grandfather had owned a clothing store. He was a relatively successful businessman. I passed the business district, and, although I could not locate the address given me, I did see a remnant of the synagogue at which he prayed. Reciting Psalms at this synagogue was a very moving experience. The tears flowed freely when I recalled my father's tales of what Tarnów used to be. My Polish taxi driver commented, "What you see is basically the way it looked back then." I thought to myself, "Yes, but today Tarnów is *Jüdenrein*. Not one Jew remains in Tarnów." Hitler was certainly successful here.

Small Towns

Passing many other *shtetlach*, we headed for Belzec and Sobibór, death camps in which more than a million people were massacred. Mostly, the victims were gassed with carbon monoxide fumes from diesel engines connected to sealed vans. This was a crude and horrible death by slow asphyxiation. The use of Zyklon-B was instituted later and was used to deliver death in the more modern Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau complexes.

Zyklon-B brought an odd blessing to some on whom it was used. Since Zyklon-B was a particular type of insecticide, it gave off fumes that would paralyze its victims' chest muscles almost immediately. Thus it saved some of them (those closer to where the tablets were dropped) from many long minutes of agonizing suffocation experienced by those unfortunate souls whose lives were taken with carbon monoxide. Himmler, of course, did not have this as his primary intention when he ordered its use. Efficiency and relieving his officers of "undue stress" were his primary motives.

Sobibór

It was dusk when I arrived at Sobibór. The twilight is said to be a beautiful, romantic time of day. It is the time between daylight and night, the hour or so that immediately follows sunset and drifts into darkness. As I made my way down what the Nazis sarcastically called the "Road to Heaven," walking toward the monuments at the sites of gas chambers and mass graves, I was attacked by mosquitoes. These were no ordinary mosquitoes, and they did not attack in ordinary numbers. They attacked voraciously in hundreds and perhaps thousands. They found every exposed spot on my body. They bit my hands, my arms, my neck. They stung my ears, my face. My running, thrashing, and swatting mattered little. They had a feast at my expense. When I reached the monuments, it took whatever discipline I could muster to

take several pictures and run back to the car. My driver noticed the huge welts on my forehead and face and offered his sympathy.

"Imagine," I thought as I sat in the relative comfort of the taxi, "what these people had to endure. Not only were they bullied, ravaged, and murdered by the Nazis, but to be devoured daily by swarms of mosquitoes was unspeakable." I could not have experienced this by reading a book, watching a video, or hearing a testimonial. A true understanding of Sobibór could only be had by experiencing this hellish place. Clearly, this was an emotionally scarring experience, but much of this encounter involved my imagination. After all, the site had not been preserved, and I had to be guided by a map.

Majdanek

Majdanek, in contrast, is totally intact — from the barracks to the crematoria — and includes several moving memorials. The camp was situated just outside the city of Lublin, a city that once had 40,000 Jews who made up some 40% of the population. Today fewer than 50 Jews remain.

Someone once said, "If Auschwitz was hell on earth, then Majdanek was the morgue." I can attest to the accuracy of that description. Close to the gate of this infamous camp was a shower room. Nozzles could be seen hanging from the ceiling. New arrivals were ordered to undress so they could be disinfected before being given new clothes and a barracks assignment. Their initial reluctance wore off when they saw water spraying from the shower heads. This truly was a real shower.

This ploy was meant to allay any apprehensions the inmates might have had. In fact, the next room was the gas chamber. I entered. It was about the size of an average classroom. After about 500 poor souls had been crammed in, the door would be sealed. A few moments later, Zyklon-B tablets would be dropped from a slot in another room. The room I entered still harbored the presence of death. I could see stains of blue on the wall caused by the powerful Zyklon-B. Fifty years of exposure to purer air could not eradicate the stains. I am still haunted by the horror of that room.

One impression that remains etched in my mind is how close this extermination camp was to the city of Lublin. The camp could be seen from the city, since it was situated at its outskirts. Apparently, the Germans correctly assumed that this would not be a problem, since Jews were not well liked in Lublin.

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When I returned to my room that evening — a one-room dive above a "petrol" station — I wrote the following entry in my diary:

> How could people live there and know and smell the barbecued Jewish meat, day after day — let alone tolerate the gassings? Horror! How could the greatest and most technologically advanced civilization in the world at the time, a civilization that produced such great scientists, artists, musicians, and authors, have committed such atrocities? Why?
>
> I guess I know the answer. The ultimate purpose of education is not the accumulation of knowledge, but rather the development of character. Its purpose is to encourage people to become caring, ethical, and sensitive. That is indeed the highest ideal of schooling and education.

Seeing and thinking about the absolute disdain for Jewish human beings was incredible. These people weren't just killed. Every aspect of their physical being was made use of. Jewish gold teeth, jewelry, and other possessions were stolen to finance the war effort and to line the Nazi leaders' pockets. Jewish hair was shorn and used for mattresses. Jewish bones were used as fertilizer. Every part of the Jewish bodies was used.

At that moment, I realized more strongly than ever before that the Nazis viewed Jews as cockroaches, not as human beings. Now I understood what Eichmann meant when he said in his defense, "What's the big deal? They're only Jews."

Warsaw

This is the largest city in Poland and is still its capital. Once the population was 30% Jewish. The city was razed by the Germans at the end of the war and is therefore a city totally rebuilt. Yet, as I tour the city and the ghetto, I struggle to recall what occurred here more than 55 years ago. The defense of the Warsaw Ghetto was the greatest single act of armed resistance against the Germans. The heroes and heroines of this episode resisted longer than it took Germany to defeat the whole of Poland.

Today, the city has been sanitized. If not for some monuments that mark this tragic and heroic time, one would never know what occurred. Without my copy of Martin Gilbert's guidebook, *Holocaust Journey* (Columbia University Press, 1997), I would have had great difficulty understanding what happened. The most memorable sight is the ghetto memorial, surrounded by buildings in a park that had been the ghetto.

Treblinka

Heading northeast from Warsaw, my taxi driver took me to the "Big Factory of Death" — a graveyard for a million souls. My diary entries for Treblinka include:

> 850,000 Jews murdered . . . unbelievable . . . stories and testimonials I read are incredible, the savagery, the butchery. . . . The 17,000 stones, varying in size, each representing a town from which Jews were deported, are striking. I walk among the stones, a graveyard. . . . Enough, I cannot go to the last death camp on my journey, Chelmno, which actually was the first death installation set up by the Nazis. There, 200,000 Jews were crudely gassed and shot.

I head to my final destination, Berlin. Perhaps I can better understand the Nazi madness by seeing the place where it all started. Yet I make this stage of the journey with trepidation, as I recall my father saying, "I would never go to Germany."

As I walk into the room where they met, I can feel the palpable presence of evil.

Berlin

Berlin is a rebuilt city and as large as New York City, but it is very cold. Some 60,000 Jews reside in Germany, more than half of them Russian immigrants. Most Germans today have never seen a Jew. As I walk and tour some of the most magnificent museums and sights, I continually look at people and ask myself, "How old was he during the war? Was he a Nazi? Why didn't she help?" Overall, I found myself wondering how Germans could have any sense of national pride. After all, they were responsible for the century's two World Wars and had lost both. Their immediate forebears were responsible for tens of millions of deaths in World War II alone. I shake my head in amazement.

Berlin is also sanitized. Wilhelmstrasse was once the center of the Nazi bureaucratic machine and is now bustling with construction sites and apartment buildings. Two buildings that remain from Nazi times catch my attention: Goebbel's Propaganda Ministry and Göring's Luftwaffe. Most other buildings are unmarked and could be identified only with the aid of a tour guide.

Two sights and observations are noteworthy. First, the location of the Gestapo headquarters is now supposed to be the site of a museum. I recall reading that in March 1943, 4,700 Jewish men who were married to German women were rounded up for deportation. Almost spontaneously, 2,000 of the non-Jewish spouses formed a crowd to protest at Gestapo headquarters. By nightfall, 2,000 more wives had joined the protest. They stayed there overnight, vociferously demanding the release of their husbands. What do you think Goebbels and Himmler did? At midday, they gave in. The 4,700 men arrested by the all-powerful Gestapo were released, and they all survived the war. This is a little-known tale of courage and defiance. I wondered, "What if more Germans had protested?"

Wannsee

My final destination before my return to the U.S. was a train and bus ride to the Wannsee Villa, a magnificent mansion at which 15 of Germany's top bureaucrats gathered to devise the "Final Solution" for the Jewish problem. This conference was ordered by Hitler and Göring. Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann were the primary participants.

As I walk into the room where they met, I can feel, as Gilbert's guidebook describes it, the palpable presence of evil. Despite the bright sunshine outside, the room seems eerily dark. Less than two months before the Wannsee Conference, on 7 December 1941, the Japanese had attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, and President Roosevelt had called it "a date that will live in infamy." So, too, this cursed title applies to the day when the German bureaucrats gathered at Wannsee and listened to the plans of the SS, nodded their assent, and then, their work completed, sat down to a sumptuous luncheon.

Implications

In my diary I wrote, "What have I learned? How will I change? What will I do?" I had thoroughly studied and investigated this dark chapter of our recent past, yet being there had reinforced and clarified certain thoughts and ideas. Three aspects of my trip stood out.

1. Although I knew that the Nazis were committed and orderly in their intent, seeing the camp systems (especially at Birkenau and Majdanek) highlighted how systematic they were in carrying out the Final Solution. The sheer treachery of their deceit is mind-boggling.

2. The degree to which various cities and sites were sanitized indicates that the past is being cleansed of unseemly and unpleasant memories.

3. Most of all, I learned about my own roots. This trip was as much for me as it was for my father. The journey as a whole jarred me to my very core. A day has not gone by since my return that I haven't thought about some aspect of what I experienced. Yet thinking about all of this is not constraining or draining, but curiously energizing and redemptive.

Writing this article is in part a response to my need to articulate in some formal way what I experienced. I also realize that we must remain vigilant. Merely reciting platitudes like "Never again!" or "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it" may offer us some comfort that reason and good intentions will prevail, but that is not enough. If my study of the Holocaust has taught me anything, it is that each of us in our own way must do something. Whether it entails becoming more religious, studying martial arts, becoming more politically active, confronting racism and bigotry directly, or teaching others about the Holocaust and its consequences, we must do something. Each of us in our own way needs to act.

My study of the Holocaust has also underscored the importance of training our children in good character traits: to be kind to others, to respect your fellow human beings, to care, to remain sensitive, and, yes, to love. Moreover, my study of the Holocaust has reinforced the ideals of fortitude, courage, faith, and hope, above all else.

Let me end by quoting from Hugo Gryn's account, included in Gilbert's book, of a wartime Chanukah and its lesson of hope and faith:

> I did not learn this lesson about faith in a theological college, that came much later, but in a miserable little concentration camp in German Silesia grotesquely called Lieberose — Lovely Rose. It was the cold winter of 1944 and although we had nothing like calendars, my father, who was my fellow prisoner there, took me and some of our friends to a corner in our barracks. . . . He announced that it was the eve of Chanukah, produced a curious-shaped clay bowl, and began to light a wick immersed in his precious, but now melted, margarine ration. Before he could recite the blessing, I protested at this waste of food. He looked at me — then at the lamp — and finally said: "You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water, but you cannot live properly for three minutes without hope!"