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Perspectives

'Hitler did not win'

By ELI RUBENSTEIN

A well-known story from the Holocaust is told by Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Shortly after Levi first arrived in Auschwitz, he saw an icicle hanging from one of the barracks. Attempting to relieve his parched throat, Levi reached for the icicle only to have it snatched away by a Nazi guard.

"Why?" the naïve Levi asked the guard, yet unfamiliar with the alien rules of "Planet Auschwitz."

The guard responded bluntly: "There is no why here." There is no "why" in Auschwitz.

This simple story illustrates the grim reality of a universe created primarily for the purpose of causing human suffering, and ultimately murder, where rules existed for the sole reason of crushing the human spirit, and where this cruel intention was made amply known to the prisoners.

Over the years, Auschwitz has been "elevated" to the symbol of human evil. The wedding of technology and murder, the staggering number of victims, the infamous moment of selection by "Dr." Josef Mengele, the "Angel of Death," the eyewitness testimonies of so many survivors, have all contributed to Auschwitz's representing the deepest abyss to which humanity can plunge.

And yet, communities around the world, as far away as Australia, have been sending thousands of young people on visits to this darkest of places, on programs like the March of the Living (for Jewish students) and the March of Remembrance and Hope (for multifaith students).

Why?

The reasons are both universal and specific, and too complex to be adequately described here.

Nevertheless, a few general reflections are worth noting.

On a universal level, Auschwitz reminds us of what the thin veneer we call "civilization" really masks, and how easy it is for societies – "advanced" or not – to slip into genocidal behavior. It has been said that after Auschwitz, we can no longer be naïve about the dark side of humanity. So too, can one no longer remain oblivious to the human capacity for evil, after a visit to Auschwitz.

Human rights education, the dignity of all humanity, the infinite preciousness of each life, what Jewish tradition calls "Tzelem Elokim" – there is no greater, more tragic reminder of the need for the inculcation of these values than a visit to a site of mass murder such as Auschwitz.

Since the Holocaust, there has been no shortage of genocides. Need I mention Rwanda, Cambodia and the ongoing tragedy in Darfur? Perhaps these calamities could have been averted if children there and throughout the world were raised within educational systems that proclaimed a love and compassion for humanity at the core of its purpose. Perhaps there would have been no perpetrators or no bystanders – or more realistically, fewer of each.

From a specifically Jewish perspective, the purpose and lessons of a visit to Auschwitz and other Holocaust sites in Poland, followed by a visit to Israel, touch upon personal, theological, cultural, political and other areas, too important and numerous to adequately address here.

But there are two areas I would like to dwell upon.

One area concerns the idea of pilgrimage. On the March of the Living, young people transport themselves thousands of miles away from their homes, and with their own two feet, tread upon the very earth where our ancestors learned, prayed, loved – and perished. This act of travelling to these former places of life and learning, and destruction and martyrdom, is in itself a cry of protest over the injustices of the past. It is an act of sacred memorialization, a statement to the entire world – and perhaps even to those who have perished – that the death of six million of our people and so many others will never be forgotten.

The students are not just learning about history, but with their physical presence they are touching and indeed entering history, making a statement, with their entire being in the present, about the past.

Sally Wasserman, a Holocaust survivor and hidden child, recalled one moment from all her trips to Poland that still stands out for her. She and her students had visited a charming town called Tykocin, a shtetl right out of *Fiddler on the Roof*. The lovingly restored small synagogue in the village square, dating back to 1642, was a reminder of the traditional way of life that once thrived there. Then the group left the idyllic town for the nearby Lopohova forest, where Tykocin's Jews were marched, ordered to dig pits, then shot en masse into the graves they had been forced to prepare for themselves. Silence engulfed the students standing at this sombre site of grievous carnage. "You know I'm not a religious person," Sally recalled, "but I couldn't help myself."

I shouted out, "Please, please, someone say Kaddish! Please!"

And Kaddish was indeed recited in the middle of the lush, green forest that hid this terrible crime – and all the children answered, "Amen."

Why do we return? To say: "We are here, and with all our might and all our strength, we proclaim on this very ground, with our bodies and our souls: We remember, we shall always remember!" And to answer, "Amen" when Kaddish is recited in the memory of our martyred ancestors.

The second area concerns the role of the survivors on the trip. The March of the Living has evolved since the trip was first begun in 1988. More attention is now paid to the rich Jewish life that existed in prewar Europe; dialogue between Jewish and Polish Christian students and meetings with the Righteous Among the Nations are encouraged; the revival of the Jewish



[Isranet and Flash90 photos]

community in Poland is discussed. But the single most significant change has been with regard to the role of the survivor.

It's hard to believe, but Holocaust survivors did not join the March of the Living in its earliest years. Now, they are seen as indispensable to the program. Each bus on this year's March of the Living, comprised of some 30 countries, will include at least one survivor who will share his or her painful Holocaust stories with the students in the very places they unfolded.

Over the years, thousands of stories have been transmitted by survivors to students travelling to Poland – standing near the dome of ashes in Majdanek, or in a barrack in Auschwitz, or among the silent stone monuments in Treblinka. Each story

is more heartbreaking than the next, each a story of life and love interrupted, of irreparable loss.

Who can forget Pinchas Gutter telling of the last time he saw his twin sister in Majdanek? All he can remember is the long golden blond braid swinging behind her back, as she was herded with their mother toward her end – but he cannot to this day, try as he might, recall her face.

And how can anyone forget Judy Weissenberg Cohen telling of the last time she saw her mother, during the selection on the train tracks in Birkenau, and how, to this day, she still wishes she had given her mother one last hug and kiss goodbye.

Which student could ever forget Anita Ekstein, whose life was saved by righteous Poles, visiting Belzec on, of all days, Mother's Day, and finding her mother's name on the memorial wall in Belzec; or the recounting of her father's last words to her, at eight years of age, which were: "Always remember who you are."

And yet, in the survivors' act of telling, of transmitting their memories to a new generation, a seed of hope is planted anew. By embarking on these trips, the young people are, in effect, pledging: "Your struggles will be remembered, your loved ones will not be forgotten. We, a new generation of young people, commit to creating a better world for the Jewish People, and for all humanity, a world far different than the one that sought to destroy your generation."

We who were born in the post-Holocaust era have inherited a broken world.

But as we study this broken world of ours and then look at the earnest faces of our young people, who so much want to understand and to not repeat the mistakes of the past, we are reminded of what Rabbi Nachman of Breslev taught us some two centuries ago: "If you believe it can be broken, then know it can also be fixed."

Hitler attempted not only to destroy the Jewish People, but to spiritually break them in the process. To reduce them from individuals, to numbers, and then to ash, to destroy the very memory of every Jewish woman, man and child.

Each time we return to Poland, each time a Holocaust survivor shares his or her story of survival, we are denying Hitler's aims. Each time a survivor shares the story of his or her martyred relatives, we are lifting them out from their anonymous deaths and denying Hitler a posthumous victory. Each time a group of young people arrives in Auschwitz and proclaims the values of human dignity and equality, we know our broken world can yet again be made whole.

Let me share one last moment from the March of the Living.

Looking out on the sea of humanity, upon thousands of young people from around the world wearing blue and white jackets, marching from Auschwitz to Birkenau on Yom Hashoah, Anita Ekstein told her daughter, Ruth: "You see? Hitler did not win."

Our Holocaust survivors and our young people have banded together to remind the world of the terrible wave of hatred that once engulfed it, and how we must strive to set a new course for humanity, one that embraces love, dignity, and empathy for each and every member of the human family.

Their legacy is our hope.

Eli Rubenstein is national director of the March of the Living and director of education for the March of Remembrance and Hope. Together with 10,000 young people from around the world, and more than 600 Canadian participants, students, survivors and adults from Canada, he will be marching on Yom Hashoah from Auschwitz to Birkenau on the 2010 March of the Living.