

THE MARCH OF THE LIVING: HEALING WOUNDED MEMORIES

It was a breathtaking winter day – we were standing in the middle of a pristine body of water, on the thick, solid ice of Maple Lake, near Parry Sound, Ontario, breathing in the fresh, bracing winter air, and the extraordinary scenery. We were all entranced by the exquisitely blue sky, the snow tipped trees glistening in the mid-day sun, and the endless carpet of untouched snow that covered the lake.

Our small group was made up of about 15 students, a few staff members, and 2 Holocaust survivors: Bill Glied and Nate Leipziger. We were part of a larger group of over 200 students and chaperones who had gathered in Camp George for a weekend Shabbaton in preparation for our 2-week journey on the March of the Living to Poland and Israel.

Suddenly, one of the survivors, Bill, came up from behind Nate, and pulled him close to him, so that they stood almost like one unit on the frozen lake. Then Bill laughed, and said: “OK, now it’s your turn –you stand in front of me...Do you remember?” Nate laughed and said, “Of course, I remember.”

Both of them then turned to me and patiently explained the “inside joke”. Nate and Bill had been prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and although they never met there, they shared similar experiences. “We used to stand at the Appelplatz for hours, at times for an entire day or night, in the bitter cold, without proper clothing, at the whim of our Nazi overseers. The wind was sometimes so terrible that we would take turns standing in front of each other to give some relief from the freezing wind.”

Sixty years later, in the middle of a frozen Ontario lake, both Nate and Bill were reminded of their experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They were able to laugh about the memory, and even contrast it with the glorious setting and the friendly company they were in. But it is not always that easy for the survivors.

Sometimes the mental images of events are so searing, so indelible and so haunting that one wonders if those who have experienced these traumas will ever be able to cope with the terrible sights they witnessed and experienced.

On a recent trip to Montreal I had occasion to hear survivors of the Holocaust, the Cambodian genocide and the Rwandan genocide speak about their experiences. Holocaust survivor, Faiga Burman Wajcer, was speaking to a small group of Montreal March of the Living students. One of her many anecdotes concerned a cattle car from Hungary whose arrival she happened to see at Auschwitz-Birkenau on a summer day. The doors clattered open, revealing inside an entire wedding party peering out to the smoke-filtered sunlight. The bride was in her white wedding gown, the groom in his finest Hasidic clothing, the Rebbe in his streimel and white stockings, all the guests wearing their best wedding finery. As the Auschwitz orchestra played, the shocked and terrified wedding party was marched directly into the gas chambers.

The following day, at a conference marking the anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, Youk Chhang, a survivor of the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, talked about his childhood experiences in the infamous killing fields of his native country. While still a young boy, he and his fellow Cambodian slave workers were called to attention as two blindfolded young people were brought out to face disciplinary action. The Khmer Rouge representative told the crowd the two had committed the unforgivable crime of “falling in love without permission”. “What should their penalty be?”, he baited the crowd. The crowd yelled: “Death. Death.” Before Youk Chhang’s eyes, the two young lovers were beaten *almost* to the point of death — then buried while they were apparently still alive.

Esther Mujawayo, a survivor of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, described her narrow escape from the hands of the Hutu murderers. Unfortunately many members of her family, including her husband and her pregnant sister, were brutally butchered. Like many innocent victims, they were hacked to death. “It was considered a privilege to be shot,” she quoted painfully. For years the image that most haunted her was of her sister’s body lying in a filthy latrine, never having been given a proper burial.

For many of the survivors, speaking about their experience is helpful. And we, the next generations, must listen well and lend an empathetic ear as they recount their life stories.

But sometimes, on rare occasions, we can even do more than listen....

During that same weekend at Camp George, the four survivors present - Anita Ekstein (Canadian March of the Living Chair), Amek Adler, Bill Glied and Nate Leipziger - shared their moving memories with the students.

Anita began the weekend by describing how her father smuggled her (then 8 years old) out of the ghetto to live as a Christian with a Polish family. “His last words were: Always remember who you are,” Anita recalled. “And in truth I never forgot who I was – I was a Jew.”

Perhaps the most poignant moment - among many - was when Amek Adler rose to speak. During Shabbat services, when the students recited the well known Jewish prayer, ‘Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad’ (Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One), the words stirred inside of Amek the most painful of memories.

“I was about 14 years old, and was a slave labourer in a concentration camp set up by the Nazis near Radom,” Amek told the hushed gathering. “One day the Nazis learned a young man had escaped the camp. The Nazis rounded up the escaped man’s remaining family, a mother and father, and two girls and one boy, ages 7-14, and forced them onto their knees in front of the all the rest of the camp inmates who had been assembled to witness their punishment. The Nazi – he had a black patch over one of his eyes – then shouted to the prisoners, ‘This is what we do to the family of someone who decides to escape.’ And then he shot each family member in the head once, then back over them again to ensure they were all dead. As the parents and the children slumped over, each proclaimed the words of the Shema on their lips before they died.”

“And, since then, each time I hear the Shema,” Amek told us, “That is the picture that comes to mind. That poor family, the parents and the children on their knees reciting the Shema as they were being executed - I can’t get it out of my head...”

We all listened in stunned silence, wondering what it must be like to carry that kind of burden, that constant memory, for an entire lifetime. But something even more remarkable was about to happen later on the weekend.

On Saturday evening, the lights were dimmed, a braided candle was lit, and all of the Marchers formed a circle in middle of the dining room to sing Havdalah in unison. Then Rabbi Glenn Black invited Amek into the center of the circle and said to him and all present: “Amek you shared with us a very personal and difficult memory. But with your permission, we are now going to try and heal that memory. We are all going to sing Shema Yisrael many times over so the picture you will have in your mind from now on, whenever you hear the Shema, will be of Jewish children marching towards a brighter future..”

Then the entire group of teenagers and chaperones broke out into a spirited rendition of Shema Yisrael, singing it perhaps 20 or 30 times, before launching into a medley of other Jewish songs. Amek was joined by his nephew Mark, his fellow survivors and their grandchildren, as the Marchers kept singing around them, as if their singing alone could carry the world into a better future.

A few weeks later, Amek addressed the group, briefly:”You know it’s working. I was in synagogue last week and I heard the Shema being recited, and for a moment I saw the image of the family in Radom, but after only a few seconds, it was replaced by all of your smiling faces...”

A memory that once seemed inconsolable, had just received redemption...

As you are reading these words, 500 Jewish teenagers from across Canada, together with a group of Holocaust survivors, will be travelling through Poland taking part in the 2006 March of the Living. After visiting Israel, they will return home with a renewed commitment to Israel, to preserving the memory of the Shoah, to raising their voice against injustice, such as the ongoing genocide in Darfur, and to healing the world for future generations.

We, the Canadian Jewish community, should feel proud that within our midst there are young people who care so deeply about the world, and about the past and future of the Jewish people.

And for all the Holocaust survivors reading this article, know there is a generation of committed courageous and caring Jewish youth who will never forget what you lived through, and will work to heal the world from a scar even as terrible as the Holocaust.

Nachamu, Nachamu Ami: Be comforted and be consoled my people! (*Isaiah 40:1*)

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