

The Nazi Holocaust refers to the W.W. II concentration camp system used for the extermination of about six million Jews and about five million non-Jews by Nazi Germany. The killings took place in specially constructed camps, most located in Poland. The victims were herded into cattle cars and transported to the camps. After days on end en route or standing unattended along the way without food, water, or medical care, many died. On arrival at certain camps the victims were told to undress for showers, but were led instead to rooms where they were gassed to death. Bodies of men, women, and children were removed by specially assigned prisoners whose working units burned them—first in open fires, and later in crematoria built for that purpose.

Sometimes inmates were deliberately starved. Those who became weak or ill were sent directly to be gassed. Some were killed in camp hospitals by injection directly into the heart. Others were hanged, beaten, or suffocated in tiny airless cells. Both planned and spontaneous brutality played a role in the treatment of inmates. They were ruled by other inmates, often former criminals imported from actual prisons, who imposed their rule by degradation, mutilation, and torture.

Certain camps combined labor and extermination, selecting incoming prisoners for one category or the other; the selections at Auschwitz were infamous. Those deemed capable of work or

considered useful in (cruel) experiments were assigned to quarters in the camp. Others were immediately taken to the gas chambers. Families were separated forever in this process.

Information about concentration camp behavior exists because of the sharing of details by a relatively small number of inmates who managed to survive.

Soon Holocaust memories will be held entirely by those who were not there!

The goal of discussing the Holocaust is not a matter of overcoming the past. One can do no such thing. The past does not lend itself to being retrospectively altered or undone. But whoever closes his eyes to the past becomes blind to the present. Whoever does not wish to remember inhumanity becomes susceptible to the dangers of new infection.

I am writing today to apologize publicly for harm caused to anyone because of my inserting myself into the descriptions of life in Auschwitz. I was not a prisoner there. I did not intend to lessen or overshadow the events which truly happened there by falsely claiming to have been personally involved. Both young listeners and adults responded to my presentations with feeling and often with a desire to share in the task of never forgetting and bearing witness. It wasn't about me. I was wrong in using an untruth (my presence) in an attempt to enhance the important truth of the suffering and death of so many—not only Jewish people, but also others held in disdain by the Nazi movement. I was wrong. I ask forgiveness. I used poor judgment and faulty reasoning, risking a sully of the truth I was trying to share.

I am seeking help from my pastor, who knows my heart and my intent. I am also consulting with a mental health professional to try to understand how I swerved off in my presentations in a direction that should not have been taken. I ask your prayers and support, as I do as much as I can to right the wrong. Again I ask for forgiveness.

Primo Levi, an Auschwitz camp prisoner and survivor, is widely known because of his insightful and erudite writing about his wartime experiences, particularly in his account of his time in Auschwitz. I was able to find and to read most of his holocaust-

related writings, some more philosophical than narrative. He became an inspiration to me, broadening my perspective from what? through why? and to what end? When he took his own life, I was shocked and saddened. To commemorate his life and as a constant reminder to myself of his influence on my thinking, I had his camp number tattooed on my left forearm—in no way an attempt to take on his identity, but in an effort to incorporate his symbol as a way of remembering him and mourning his loss.

My book is still in an early rough stage, not because I feared its publication but because the very nature of the writing “changed midstream.” Wide reading has ignited my interests into a more explanatory mode, exploring Nazi doctrines and their origins, how they were affected by social Darwinism, and eugenics, as used by a number of countries, including the United States. The reading goes well beyond the concept of the “master race.” My place in autobiographical content is non-essential and was gone with the initial editing. Whether to proceed with the writing is a question yet to be decided, given my age, state of health, and other priorities.

The dangers involved in the war years for my family were real and frequent. We spent many months first searching for a place of safety as the war spread all over Europe. Foiled in our first plan for departure by the bombing of Belgrade on the day before our scheduled departure from that city, we moved about Yugoslavia trying to stay together as a family and to find a place of relative safety. We decided to try to reach Italy, believing that the Italians were less blood thirsty than the Nazis.

A bridge in Fiume carried traffic and refugees onto Italian soil. Officials on the bridge did not believe our story that we were Italian vacationers returning home, because they felt our Italian speech was too textbook correct, not the dialect spoken there by the natives. They placed us on a train bound for an internment camp in a central part of the country in a town called Rapino. As soon as Patton liberated Sicily, Italy changed sides in the war. They became Allies, no longer part of the Axis. Our guards went home, declaring that we were free to go. We had no place to go.

When it was reported that Allied troops were working their way north, loosely toward us, my parents decided to look for a cave in the Appenines where we could await their arrival. Delay

followed delay. The Allies were blocked by the strong enemy presence at Mount Cassino. Impatient with the waiting, father and I decided to cross the front lines in the snow. We hired a guide, who as it turned out had accepted money from the enemy, too. We found ourselves led directly into the hands of an enemy snow patrol, invisible in their white gear until they rose from the snow around us. Father was thrown to the ground. His fingers were broken when his outspread hands were trampled by uniform boots.

On our next attempt we literally walked into an Allied group of mixed nationality. A Hindustani swung his scimitar over my head, convincing me that he meant to separate me from it at the neck. A French-Canadian soldier nearby read the situation and responded to my attempt at a call for help in French. A Cockney patrol turned us over to an American group with whom we could speak who debriefed us about other refugee groups and German troop positions in the area, then took us to a refugee camp farther south in Italy along the Adriatic coast. A large number of displaced persons were being sheltered there.

I found a job as a waiter in a Red Cross coffee and doughnut shop for officers, where I met Major Leo Miller, C O of the 1898 Engineer Aviation Battalion. He employed me as his interpreter for the three hundred Italians who helped his American battalion prepare the Italian airports to accommodate the American airplanes that would be flying in with supplies.

I worked for Major Miller until my family was notified that we had been selected part of a nine-hundred-plus size group of displaced persons that would be transported to safety in the United States for the duration of the war. We were all assigned to the troop carrier Henry Gibbons and made part of a convoy headed from Naples to New York. It was planned that the group would be sheltered at Fort Ontario, New York. At the end of the war we were to be returned to our country of origin or to the port of embarkation—Naples.

In the camp at Fort Ontario, we were trained in local behaviors by volunteers from the American Society of Friends. I was able to attend Oswego High School and was graduated after sixteen months. Our odyssey was almost over. The original plan for us to leave the country when the war ended was modified to allow those who wanted to stay in the U.S. to emigrate formally. We were welcomed to make official application in order to

earn citizenship and enjoy the sense of finally being settled and belonging.

My family and I had spent the war years in hiding. We had suffered extreme trauma physically and psychologically, in cramped quarters, in constant fear of discovery or outright betrayal, not knowing which of our extended family members were still alive. When we were housed in the refugee camp in Bari, I began to relive my earlier experiences in the form of nightmares, flashbacks in which I felt again in grave danger.

I showed startle responses to innocuous stimuli like the engine noises of airplanes or the scream of sirens. These moments brought guilt as well, guilt for having survived when so many others died.

A serious adjustment problem for me had to do with social behavior. I was on the street ^{in Belgrade} returning with food for the family when an SS officer stopped me and asked my name. I stood at attention, looked straight into his face, and made eye contact. At this point he hauled off and struck me in the nose and chin with his clenched fist. I ended up on the ground, bleeding from my nose and mouth as he screamed at me "How dare you, you Untermensch, look at me, a member of the master race. You look at the ground. Show humility. Be humble." As I lay on the ground bleeding, he kicked me in the ribs as he walked away. I

remembered that years later when I was in the United States. I had to learn all over again to make conscious eye contact with people, as I had been taught by my father.

Because I had lived in constant fear for so long, I exhibited a high level of general anxiety and a heightened sensitivity to possible sources of danger. I had to consciously learn to relate to other people on a more normal basis. That change was not easy.

Troubled by nightmares and deep continuing fears, I decided to fly to Europe to “confront my devils.” Arriving at Auschwitz, I found a clean and polished tourist destination. Fine European cars were parked where prisoners had reported to line up for rollcall. Visitors commented quite openly that stories circulating about Nazi cruelty, persecution and death having occurred there were “propaganda.” Laughter and joking accompanied the denial. There was a gift shop stocked with pictures, postcards, and pamphlets printed in Polish, German, English, and French. A guide was assigned to each small group, describing from a script a well-cleaned-up history of the camp. I was distressed at the lack of feeling about the heartache, the suffering, and so much death. Flagrant denial and ignorance of the truth made me determined to keep the memories alive. I had hoped that the visit would serve as a catharsis for my sleeplessness, nightmares and fears, but it did not. Instead I determined at that moment to do everything in my power to prevent the loss of the truth about wartime life (and death) at Auschwitz.

I am not a writer. I have not developed a connection with any one specific language, although I now function primarily in English. My father, while searching for a safe haven for us—his family—took us to spend time temporarily in several European countries where we learned new ways of living and of language. We wanted to fit in inconspicuously, not knowing when hostilities would increase. I attended a different school after each move, usually for just part of a term, and I learned to fend off a whole new set of bullies who were willing to take care of “the new kid.” Over time I became comfortable with German, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, French, Hungarian, and English.

Writing for me is still an arduous task, because my syntax and vocabulary are in a constant search for the right word. I am often reminded of Mark Twain, who is known to have said that “the difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” Ah, the saving sense of humor.

Unanswered questions in my mind sent me looking for answers by reading widely in Holocaust literature. Some of my questions involve the deaths of my own relatives. The wide reading intensified images formed in conversation with survivors I had met in the United States. Through the years I carefully held those memories quiet, not wanting to burden ~~those~~ the people close to

me. But the more I learned, the more real the images became, and the more intense my feeling of responsibility for keeping the memories alive. Words seemed so inadequate. I struggled with the truth. How could I assure that the message of the Holocaust would be heard and understood?

Fear is still with me, expanded to include the possibility that I may have interfered with a strong and important message by using faulty methods to keep it powerful and unforgettable.

I ask that you forgive me if you feel you can, forget me if you feel you must, but keep the truth and the memory of the Holocaust always in your heart and mind.

In the preface to his book *Versions of Survival* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1983), Professor Lawrence Langer of Simmons College examines closely the process of recalling and writing, with its inseparable hazards and need for specific care. He writes “By calling this book *Versions of Survival*, I do not mean to question the accuracy...of accounts of death camp experience. But in the collision between memory and truth, intention sometimes meets stubborn resistance from a very complex and often unconscious method of reclaiming the facts. Tillers in the field of atrocity sometimes suffer from a disconcerting uncertainty about the process of recollection itself. The dilemma has been stated concisely by a critic who happens to be writing about Lillian Hellman’s autobiography volumes, though the relevance to writing about the Holocaust is immediately evident:

Even as we recall the past our memories reshape it until it is hard to tell if we remember original experiences or only earlier memories of them. At the same time, the process of remembering is interpretative, and creates new self-understanding, so that we change ourselves through our recollections. Any quest after objective truth which employs memory as the tool of vision must of necessity then be frustrated by both the initial selectivity of perceptions which later furnished memories; then by the gradual alteration of memory through repetition and interpretation; and finally by the particular configuration of the self at the moment of actual recall.

In this sense, every survivor memoir must be read, at least partially, as a work of the imagination, which selects some details and blocks out others for the purpose of shaping the reader’s response—indeed for the purpose of organizing the author’s own response, too. But we must guard against establishing too rigid a rhetoric of death camp commentary, lest

future generations mistake the rhetoric for the ultimately ungraspable reality itself. An axiom of the narrative mode, from which survivor memoirs are not exempt, is that all telling modifies what is being told.” Preface, pp xi and xii.