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# The Jerusalem Report

## Transcendence in a Cursed Place

By Stuart Schoffman

We are marching in silence down a Polish country road. The sky is gray. Two men with a horse plow an adjacent field. Suddenly, there it is, the long low red brick building with the watchtower in the middle, and the railroad tracks leading inside. We enter the camp and take in the rows of wooden barracks, the barbed wire. Workers are repairing one of the once-electrified fences, casually and routinely. This is an open-air museum, after all, a representation, a theme park from hell. Lush grass grows everywhere, as it did not when the camp was active and prisoners ate leaves from the trees. The snack bar sells ice cream and the book shop takes MasterCard. Khatib throws his arms around me. "I have to hug you," he says. He is a schoolteacher from Qalansuwa, east of Netanyah, who has shown his ninth graders "Schindler's List." "Instead of arming yourselves," he says to me, "you should airlift people to see this place."

This is my first visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, but no ordinary one. My reactions to this awful place are mediated, refracted, distracted, intensified, and diluted, too, by the remarkable mixed company of which I am a part: about 250 Israelis, of whom half are Jews and half are Arabs - Christian and Muslim and Druse. Father Emile Shoufani of Nazareth, a Catholic priest and educator, has initiated this journey, titled "Memory for Peace," so that his fellow Israeli Arabs may better understand - indeed share - the pain of the Jews. No quid pro quo is expected; this is not, in the firm view of "Abouna" - "our father," as Shoufani is known to all of us - about politics. We are teachers, professionals, business people, some of us recruited by the group's leaders - on the Jewish side, this is organizational consultant Ruth Bar-Shalev, daughter of the late IDF chief of staff Motta Gur - and others brought aboard by friends.

Polish-born Holocaust survivor Shevach Weiss, former Speaker of the Knesset and current ambassador to Poland, does not accompany us but addresses the group on the chartered Israeli plane before takeoff from Tel Aviv: "Everyone feels the electricity of this unique combination of people." Even the pilot weighs in: You will all be changed, he says, by this "difficult and important journey." This does not happen on flights to Orlando. To say that expectations are high is an understatement. But expectations of what?

Barely three hours later we are in Poland. We board six buses, each with an Arab leader and Jewish guide, and drive to Kazimierz, Krakow's old Jewish quarter. Father Shoufani wears a big white yarmulke and listens patiently as our guide Yaniv speaks about Rabbi Moses Isserles, the 16th-century sage who here adapted the Shulhan Arukh, the standard code of Jewish law, for Ashkenazi usage. Inside the "Remuh" synagogue, acronymically named for Isserles, Yaniv teaches the group a wordless niggun composed in Krakow by the late Shlomo Carlebach. Most of the Jews sing along and most of the Arabs don't. We are fellow citizens, Hebrew-speaking Israelis, but our shared culture is scant, and our memories often antithetical. Throughout the trip I am struck that Israeli Jews and Arabs do not have songs they can sing together. The national anthem, invoking Jewish heart and soul, is out of the question. An equivalent to "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" does not yet exist.

Vanished Jews, garnished with gefilte-fish menus and klezmer festivals, are a tourist attraction in Poland today. Adjacent to the Ester Hotel, named for the legendary Jewish mistress of the beneficent 14th-century King Casimir the Great, we find the Popper Synagogue, now an art studio for Polish youth. Yaniv is explaining how itinerant Jewish merchants would stop for Shabbat, enjoy local hospitality, make business connections, and he says - referring to the ban upon traveling on the holy day - "Listen, Jews have a problem..." Whereupon he is interrupted by one of the Arabs, making a simple but revealing joke: "Only one?" Actually, there is only one, I think: the eternal Jewish Problem of victimhood and its attendant complexes, which Zionism sought, and failed, to remedy, and which the Arabs have come here, with us, to confront and deconstruct. As an Arab woman, a PhD in education, succinctly put it to me: "You are a nuclear power. What are you afraid of?"

Our first glimpse of Auschwitz is a nondescript road alongside a railroad track. I am walking with Adam Druks, a retired architect from the Western Galilee who grew up here, in the town of Oswiecim. Kids ride by on bikes. Later, back in Krakow, Arabs in our discussion group say they were struck by the ongoing daily life so close to Auschwitz-Birkenau. An old man stands by his front gate, watching the solemn parade. With us now are 200 French fellow travelers - Jews and Christians but mainly Muslims - recruited by Shoufani, who studied for the priesthood in France. Among them are many women in head scarves; the Muslims in our group, by contrast, are mainly secular. A fair proportion of our Israeli Arab companions are communists. The one Russian Israeli I have met on the trip is a non-Jewish woman married to an Arab anaesthesiologist who got his degree in the Soviet Union and, as a teenager, would make annual visits to a Red Army war memorial in a JNF forest near Abu Ghosh.

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It is no small matter for an Israeli Arab, torn between Palestinian nationhood and Israeli citizenship, to undertake this trip. Over and over, on the bus, in discussion groups, in impromptu conversation, one hears how participants deliberated long and hard, were urged by other Arabs not to come, not now. Emotions have run especially high since October 2000, when Israeli police shot dead 13 Arab demonstrators in the Galilee. Nor was this an easy decision for many Jews. A woman on my bus has told the group she had felt it was a "violation of a Holy of Holies" to be here with Arabs, but came to realize "there is no other way. From this great evil we must grow something new and better." Adam Druks is telling me that today no Jews live in Oswiecim, which once had a Jewish majority, but the Chevre Lomdei Mishnayot synagogue has been restored, to house a museum and offer a place for visitors to pray, to say Kaddish. At the same time I overhear a snatch of conversation, an Arab talking to a Jew in Hebrew: "I'm not saying I have no feelings. There is nobody who does not have feelings. But I am saying something else. You have to be selective in those feelings, and don't let the bad ones overpower you." He uses the word "seleksia" - with no double meaning intended, I am sure - but when I hear it a chill runs through me.

We stop beside a row of low brick buildings, abandoned, covered with graffiti. A dapper man with a small black yarmulke stands in the tall grass by the tracks: Marcello Pezzetti, a prominent Holocaust researcher from Milan. "Here," he says, "the train stopped and they unloaded the Jews who stood as you stand here now." He speaks slowly in French, Shoufani translating; the words sink in. Right here is where it began, where the first selections were made by Nazi doctors; only later were the train tracks extended into the camp itself. "And imagine it. Of this immense group, 15 percent would live a bit longer. All the others were killed immediately. They were put on trucks and taken to their deaths. The small group that had been selected for work went on foot to Birkenau. What is incredible is that there is no sign or marker indicating what this place was." A tall Arab Israeli man in a snap-brim cap asks, on what basis did they do the selection? And a chorus of answers from the Jews: the weak, the old, the children, whoever couldn't work.

The shock to the system seems stronger with the Arabs. They keep asking the most basic questions, such as why the world allowed this to happen. I think of Primo Levi, who in "Survival in Auschwitz" is told by a guard: Hier ist kein warum, there is no "why" here. The Arabs have studied the Holocaust at school but what they see here is a revelation to most of them. We Jews have been steeped since childhood in these ghastly images and stories. "I thought," a Beduin from the Negev says, as after dinner at the Piast hotel in Krakow we sit in a circle and share our impressions, "that the Jews were exaggerating these things, but now I know you aren't." He drapes his arm over the leg of the man sitting beside him, an American businessman wearing a yarmulke. A Jewish professor from Haifa says that it is good to cry on the Arabs' shoulders, to remember "how to be weak," which we Israeli Jews have unfortunately forgotten.

Again we are walking, walking. Aziz Darawshe fingers his worry beads. Birds chatter in the birches. Darawshe is a physician. He runs the emergency room at Ha'emek hospital in Afula, where less than a week before he treated Israelis wounded in a suicide bombing. "Fifty- five years," he says, "you can't overcome us and we can't overcome you." He is my bus captain, a man with a sense of purpose and a marvelous sense of humor. To relieve the tension he tells jokes on the bus, some of them off-color, and a few of the Jews are irked by this. I am pleased to engage him now in conversation. I am here as a participant, as a peace-seeking Israeli and the great-grandson of Slovakian Jews who quite likely met their end in Auschwitz, but the journalist in me senses a great quote coming. But suddenly we come upon an overweight French man in a knitted yarmulke who is feeling unwell, exhausted from the long trek. Aziz stops to take care of him. Television cameras quickly converge to record the perfect scene. After all, shared humanity - "love, charity, compassion," in Father Shoufani's words - is what this journey is all about.

Together we are sobbing and dumbstruck, Arab and Jew, in the "sauna" where slave laborers were de-loused, shorn, humiliated; amid the rubble of gas chambers and crematoria that the Germans destroyed as the Soviets drew near. I say Kaddish for my mother's grandparents by the marshy pond near Crematorium 5 where victims' ashes were dumped. It is the closest thing at Auschwitz to a grave. We hear the testimony of survivors, chiefly that of Esther Mannheim, a petite, eloquent retired teacher from Tel Aviv who survived the Krakow ghetto and Auschwitz and the "death march" of evacuated prisoners in early 1945, when she ate snow and yearned for Auschwitz, where at least she could sleep with a roof over her head.

But the simple, shattering moment that somehow encapsulates all others takes place in the so-called Quarantine Barracks at Birkenau, when an Israeli grandmother named Ruth Lavie holds up a picture she had drawn at age 6 for her father, Dov Jungrau, who was taken to Auschwitz and never returned. The family had lived in Amsterdam; Ruth, an only child, was hidden by gentiles. "Abba," she says, "this picture never reached you. Now I leave it here in this cursed place, in your memory and that of mother Leah who was murdered at Sobibor. I still miss you and will never forget you." And out of the commingled tears, Jewish and Arab, the Jews begin to sing, classic songs of the Holocaust: "Eli, Eli" by Hannah Senesh, the doomed poetess- paratrooper; "Song of the Partisans," translated from the Yiddish; "Ani Ma'amin" - I believe - the Maimonidean affirmation of belief in the Messiah, tarry though he may, a song that was sung in the camps, and often today at the Passover Seder.

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I am walking along the infernal railroad tracks in Birkenau with a secular Jew. He tells me that the singing in the barracks had upset him. Had I noticed that by the end nearly all the Arabs had walked out? And did they have to sing that messianic song? It reminded him of Gush Emunim, of triumphalist settlers at a West Bank outpost. I am bewildered. It turns out my friend is unaware that "Ani Ma'amin" is deeply emblematic of the Holocaust. I later ask one of the Arabs on my bus if he was bothered by the singing, and he says, not at all. Indeed in the same barracks the Muslims had offered a traditional prayer of their own. But what did, in the end, disturb some of the Arabs was an original poem recited at the closing ceremony by an Arab Christian woman who teaches Arabic at a Jewish school: "My God... why did you not hear the Children of Israel?... These are your Chosen People." Such language, to some Arab ears, crossed the line into collaboration with the Zionists.

I am eating breakfast at the hotel with two longtime Israeli Jewish activists of divergent political persuasions. One worries that the Arabs will come away overly empathetic with the Jews and forgiving of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. The other is concerned that, having now come to the inaccurate conclusion that the Holocaust is the prime mover of Zionism, the Arabs will feel freer to be dismissive of the age-old Jewish birthright in the Land of Israel. Lunch the same day, our second at the camps, is a surreal picnic: tuna sandwich and banana in a plastic box on the lawn by the parking lot at Birkenau. I am chatting with an Arab woman from Taibe. She had long wondered, she says, why fear and not hope was the "leading force" in the Israeli mind. Given all that the Jews had suffered, she would have expected them to be more sensitive than they are to the plight of others. But now, she sees how badly the Nazis damaged the Jews.

After being at Auschwitz, no Arab can suggest any equivalency between the Holocaust and their nakba, the loss of the Palestinian homeland. But Arabs can and do make a causal connection, and perceive themselves as secondary victims of the Nazis. As an Arab municipal official very carefully phrased it, speaking on our bus, "Now I better understand part of the behavior of my brothers, the Jewish citizens of the State of Israel." On the lawn at Birkenau, between bites of tuna, I ask my new friend - a schoolteacher who speaks Hebrew more fluently than I do - if she understood better now why Jews need a state of their own. "A Jewish and democratic state is a paradox," she replies. I am a citizen, what about my rights? My land? I empathize with her. I also realize that we still have a long way to travel on our mutual journey.

"We made history!" exclaims Nazir Majali, an Arab journalist and one of the group's leaders, as we gather with the French delegation on our final night. I am wary of hyperbole, but I also sense that something special, even transcendent, has been born. What it can grow into, no one yet knows. In "The Origins of Totalitarianism," Hannah Arendt wrote of Auschwitz as a "laboratory" that demonstrates that "everything is possible." Father Shoufani has turned that satanic idea on its head. "We did not only enter a place of death," he says that night in Krakow. "We emerge from death into life and hope... If two peoples engaged in conflict can have experienced something like this, everything is possible."

As the taxi back from the airport enters Jerusalem, we pass the Sanhedriah cemetery, where my father's Russian-born parents are buried. How lucky they were, and I along with them. The following day, George Bush tours Auschwitz; several days thereafter he is in Aqaba, presiding over a peace summit at which Palestinian prime minister Abu Mazen, author of a Holocaust-denying doctoral thesis, declares: "We do not ignore the suffering of the Jews throughout history." For the first time in a long time, I am quietly hopeful.

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