If Jews and Germans Can Embrace

The Convocation at Auschwitz

December 4-8, 1994

Edited by Paula Green

This chapter is concerned with the events and personal reactions that many of us — the 200 participants—experienced during the Convocation at Auschwitz, Poland, that initiated and gave context to the Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life 1995.

Reverend Sasamori, Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist monk, lifts his prayer-drum to commence the day's chanting. Behind him, wrapped in blankets, pilgrims and Convocation participants recite *Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo*, giving birth to a sound that will echo all day in the icy wind of a gray December. It is the chant from the Lotus Sutra, and it will be carried across the eastern half of the world when the Pilgrimage begins.

Reverend Sasamori and a group of internationals of many faiths are sitting on the selection platform at Birkenau concentration camp, between two sets of train tracks that end here. There was no exit from this selection platform except to death in one of the four smoking crematoria, or to a slower death by exhaustion in the work barracks. On this spot, the Nazi commandant pointed his finger as each person spilled forth from the cattle cars, selecting their means and moment of death. It is fifty years since the ovens at Birkenau were shut down. But

There was no exit from this selection platform except to immediate death in one of the four smoking crematoria, or to a slower death by exhaustion in the work barracks.

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the camp remains unchanged—a stark hell-realm, monument to greed, hatred and delusion.

Sasamori and the others drum, pray and fast continuously for eight days. Their prayers are met by the vast silence of our surroundings: crematoria and tracks, barracks and barbed wire as far as the eye can see.

—Paula Green

I arrive at Oswiecim, the town bordering the camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, by train. It is possible to take a bus or cab from Krakow, but the railroad was the vehicle that transported the victims of Auschwitz, so I felt honor-bound to follow in their tracks. What was it like to come here fifty years ago, a one-way passage to a nightmare known only in whispers? Subconsciously, I expect to find the town frozen in time with occupying German troops and an unspeakable cloud of smoke on the horizon. Instead, I exit the terminal into crowds of Polish schoolchildren, hooked up to their Walkmans, bustling from electronic stores to Coca-Cola stands. Cabs and buses scurry about, and young lovers hug as they meet by the bus stop. The aura of normality is jarring, as though I've landed at a suburban Connecticut commuter station instead of Auschwitz. I survey my surroundings. The antique town center is still there, but rivaled now by a postwar industrial sprawl of distant factories that belch their untreated discharges into the sky. The air is clogged with a thick, gray haze that defies the cold winter air. Both camps are preserved and remain west of the town. As I ride a taxi to the German Reconciliation Youth Center, the driver informs me that there is only one Jew living in Oswiecim today.

—Daniel Brown

Brother Sasamori, Chanukah service at Auschwitz main gate

The bleakness lifted that night as swiftly as it had come when we went as a group, all two hundred of us, to the gates of Auschwitz where the ironic German words hang over the entrance gate: *Arbeit Macht Frei*, "Work makes you free." We came to commemorate the last night of *Chanukah* there against the gate, there against the barbed wire, all of us with *Chanukiahs* filled with unlit candles.

We offered the blessings and lit the first candle. As we did so, the sky opened for about five seconds of the lightest possible drizzle—perhaps the blessing of departed souls, perhaps their tears. Never before had we experienced such an extraordinary manifestation of light into the darkness: the juxtaposition of candle flames and barbed wire. None of us could leave the site. We stood transfixed in silence, until the last candle had burned away.

—Jim Levinson

This morning we visited Auschwitz again. Thank God I could cry when I saw the huge and beautiful *taleism* (prayer shawls) in one of the exhibit cases. The hair. The suitcases. The artificial limbs. The tooth and hair brushes. The shoes—especially the stylish high heels.

The photos of prisoners' faces. The bunks. The bleakness—gray, smoggy, dingy, ugly. I am so ashamed of the human race. Then I lit a *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle, and we said *Kaddish*, the prayer that affirms life, that praises the Creator, that insists there is meaning, purpose and direction in the cosmos, that ends with hope and peace.

I feel vulnerable being here as a Jew with non-Jews. How could I not fear invisibility and destruction? It is hard, maybe impossible, as a Jew, to be here and generalize. But I so want to stand with others.

Yes, it was the past, and we must face the future. But we can only do that when we have grieved and strengthened ourselves. Who knows where the past ends and the future begins?

—Sheila Weinberg

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I am a school teacher whose life is surrounded by young people. In Block 5, there is a display table of toddlers' shoes, rubber nipples and little threadbare sweaters, testament to the 1,500,000 children whose lives were snuffed out by the *Sho'ah* [the Jewish Holocaust]. My fifth grade students have voluntarily written letters to their peers and asked me to bring them here. One is soberly addressed "To all the children who were thrown away." It is on this table that I lay them. As the papers descend onto the surface, I visualize the sweet young faces of my kids, their open hearts and goodness. Suddenly, I feel as though my body is shot through with a white light of sorrow. The souls of all the murdered children roar through my heart, and I collapse on the stone floor weeping and shattered, not caring for a minute who is watching.

—Daniel Brown

Father Herbert of Heidelberg plays a magic flute to ease the pain of disclosure. But that is not all. He brings a portrait of a broken-hearted Jesus, painted by a Nazi soldier after the war. This soldier carried his image of Jesus throughout Germany and Poland, begging forgiveness for his sins.

Father Herbert is German, a member of *Pax Christi*. He had hesitated when I invited him to come: would he be scapegoated and blamed for Germany's sins? Could he bear the pain? I could not realize his deep yearning for healing until, standing on the selection platform at Birkenau, he lifted the suffering Jesus portrait to his chest and spoke of his own father, a Nazi soldier.

—Paula Green

After an intense prayer service at the platform, the participants line up and march to the crematoria rubble that sits at the end of the tracks. These ruins have lain untouched since 1944 when Himmler ordered the exterminations halted and the complexes dynamited. Despite the destruction, one is able to locate the undressing room, the cremation area and the gas chamber itself. This is the apex of the Holocaust, the nightmare finally becoming real. By the time we assemble on the roof of Crematorium #2, all of us have been transported back a half century.

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The main speaker this morning is John Schuchardt, who denounced George Bush in the president's own church at the height of the Gulf War. He stands lost in thought, then slowly sinks to his knees. From this posture, he delivers a blistering condemnation of Christianity's role in the Holocaust and its two thousand year legacy of anti-Jewish hatred. No Christian, he asserts, can even enter this space unless he or she does so in absolute repentance. His thunderous voice collapses into a heart-rending wail, so loud that it vibrates across the expanse of broken stone.

Soon after, Rabbi Sheila Weinberg places memorial candles along the entryway to Crematorium #3. She stands solitary and grim, her eyes those of an Old Testament prophet sent by God to demand justice.

—Daniel Brown

Bina is from England, here to honor the memory of her father, murdered in Birkenau. An accomplished and dignified woman, now fragile and elderly, she steps forward amidst the concrete rubble of a former crematorium blown up by the Nazis as they fled the advancing Russian troops exactly fifty years ago. She lights a candle as Rabbi Sheila, from the United States, says *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer in honor of the dead. Friends hold her trembling hand. As a young woman, Bina lost a father she could never bury or properly mourn. This journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau, her first, marks a completion for her.

Others follow Bina, first naming relatives lost to the Holocaust, then offering candles to Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Burma, Native Americans, women, people with AIDS, all those ravaged by sorrow and war. We join together arm in arm for silent procession through Birkenau. Together, Jews and Christians, Germans, Japanese, Italians, British, Americans: "enemies" from World War II.

Back at the Convocation center, we listen to Rosalie from *One By One*, whose members are children of Holocaust survivors or children of Nazis. For two years the group has been meeting, facing this ultimate "other," recounting stories, discovering commonalities as the children of victims or persecutors. Overcoming barriers of fear and guilt, *One By One* testifies to the power of reconciliation.

Unlike the other members, Otto is not the child of persecutor or victim. Now in his sixties, he was himself an SS soldier. A brave man, he risks censure at home in Berlin, where most want to forget the war and blot out the Holocaust. Otto cannot forget, indeed will not be silenced as he travels to schools, churches and community gatherings to recount his experiences, to repent, however belatedly.

—Paula Green

A remarkable encounter took place at the Convocation between Helga, a German daughter of a Nazi SS officer, and me, an American of Polish-Jewish descent.

Helga, who lives in the small town of Puchheim near Munich, had been filled with trepidation when she learned of the Convocation. Yet, she felt compelled to be here and to tell her story, which she did two days before the end of the convocation.

Helga had grown up believing her father was a German war hero. The fiction was reinforced by her family at every occasion. It continued after her father returned from the war, then suddenly died. But something didn't ring quite true to the now teenage Helga who, in time, came upon information indicating that far from being a hero, her father had been a Nazi war criminal.

It got worse and worse. Helga began to dig deeper in the war records; the Nazis, believing they would be around a thousand years, documented everything. Helga even learned that, quite possibly, what she had experienced as the death of her father had been a staged funeral and that he may have escaped to South America.

As she began to learn more about her father, she found herself more and more estranged from her family. Now, in addition, she began to have dreams of herself living in a house built on skulls, of the river near her home filled with floating corpses.

Helga concluded her story by saying that her father had been the Nazi commandant responsible for the liquidation of the Jewish ghetto in the town of Lida in Little Russia. As she mentioned the name of the town, I gasped aloud. Lida was where my family had lived for countless generations.

My knees became very shaky, and a knot formed in my stomach as I walked up to the front of the room after the session and proceeded to speak with her. As I made the connection, Helga became visibly pale and then nearly hysterical, telling me she knew that one day she would have to meet someone whose family had been victims of her father. I was filled with dread as I wondered whether Helga would ask me for the forgiveness that was not mine to give.

In my ears rang the words of the prophets that the children were not to suffer for the sins of their parents. But I heard also the infinitely harsher words of Eli Wiesel: "Do not forgive the murderers and their accomplices. God, merciful God, do not have mercy on those who had no mercy on Jewish children."

I experienced all of these emotions and more as Helga and I talked and talked. What became clear from the hours we spent together is that we were both victims. The broken and tormented Helga was a victim, just as clearly as any of us who had lost our families. My ancestors were murdered by her ancestors—and yet we both were victims. At Auschwitz something very rare happened: the opportunity for the children of the murderer and the murdered to grieve their terrible griefs together.

—Jim Levinson

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In the final meetings at the Convocation, there was a profound and devastating slide presentation on the unremitting violence and destruction that continues in Cambodia. A survivor of Hiroshima spoke. Ilsa Kokula talked movingly of the victimization of gays and

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Two days after the end of the Convocation, eighty pilgrims said goodbye to the rest of the participants and began their long journey of peace towards Hiroshima.

—*Paula Green*

lesbians under the Third Reich and their continued oppression today. A Serbian woman recounted the suffering in the former Yugoslavia. Dennis Banks of the American Indian Movement rallied us to action and mused on what would have occurred if there had been a peace walk to Auschwitz in 1943. He charged us strongly not to give up the long walk that the Pilgrimage demanded in the face of cold, heat, pain, frustration, loneliness. He urged us to bear all for the sake of peace and for those who were robbed of it. At night we sang and danced: Japanese, Italians, Indians, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, all danced the *hora*.

—*Sheila Weinberg*

If Germans and Jews can embrace at Auschwitz, if we can dance together the rhythms of the destroyed ghettos, if we can see in each other the ancient Jew, the suffering Jesus, the broken soldier, the victim and the perpetrator, then all healing is possible, even the complete healing of our broken world.

May this experience be a blessing and a healing. May we all be ever growing in the clarity and courage needed to heed the human imperative of the Holocaust. In the words of the historian Yehuda Bauer: "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander!"