

For The Ghosts of Oswiecim

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As the days passed approaching the trip, a dark cloud on the horizon placed a lump in my throat. It would be a busy time adjusting to the environment of an unknown country while taking on the challenge of an intensive teacher-training program and on top of this, I knew that Krakow, Poland was near the legendary Auschwitz. There was no escape from the realization that as a human, I had a duty to confront directly one of the greatest acts of evil in human history. It was vexing but I knew I had no choice but to look evil directly in the eye.

A respect for the unknown had always made me suspicious of the simplified black and white image of the vicious soldier-beast committing atrocities as if to suggest that a whole nation had simply all gone crazy at the same time. The picture could not be so simple. The average person must have been there, then just as everybody is here, now. The time and place would have had its own explanation, justification, and concession. There was no such thing as a nation that had gone crazy and a subjectivity hidden in that time and place must have made the holocaust seem normal or logical given the chain of events. Anybody who was there would have been part of this without noticing that anything was wrong. This I did not want to understand.

Such deep cultural factors, and the story leading up to the holocaust surely could not be understood within a short month's stay but talking to my fellow teachers had revealed some interesting facts. The Polish government had the policy of avoiding referring to the Jewish people as being the main victims of the holocaust. Furthermore, in the Auschwitz museum, the guides had been instructed to avoid exclusively talking about the Jews and would often change the subject when asked about them. The tragedy was not the sole propriety of the Jewish people. This was a Polish tragedy and a European one that had engulfed a whole continent. What had led into it was not exclusively an anti-Semitism but a much broader institutionalized 'racial mania'. Governments had gotten

into a meticulous process of trying to determine the ethnic origins, or 'race' of all of its citizens by classifying people into groups according not to their country of birth, or native culture and language, but by their family history and physical features. One image that left a strong impression was within the building at Auschwitz that was dedicated to the Gypsy, or more accurately Sinti and Roma people victimized by this racial mania. There was a black and white picture of a doctor using a caliper device to measure the distance from the center of the eyes to the chin in order to determine the 'race' of an unknowing middle-aged housewife.

This reminded me of the present day practice in Japan where the city hall fingerprints and issues special ID cards to citizens it has determined "foreigner" based on family records that have been meticulously kept. These people are born in Japan and for many of them the issuance of the card and the directive that they use their foreign names for all official documents is the first time they realize they belong to such a classification. If one doesn't know their foreign name, one will be provided by approximating a name in the foreign language similar to the 'Japanese' one they have known themselves as throughout childhood. Being a member of such a classification also results in being treated differently under the law and among other things, being entitled to less social welfare from the government.

For the Sinti and Roma peoples, the issuance of the card was a first step. Next came compulsory sterilization; they were not to reproduce and dirty society with their offspring. Finally, it meant the gas chambers.

What then is the next step for the Japanese government? What is the purpose of keeping such meticulous family records of its naturally born citizens and imposing unfamiliar names and pseudo-nationalities on them? In the end, isn't this the same sort of 'racial mania' that swept across Europe? Here in present day Japan too, the average person is trapped in the here and now and cannot see how ridiculous and dangerous such institutionalized discrimination is. We are blind. No government has the right to collect such data because there is no telling what it may be used for. The danger is clear and foreboding. Auschwitz

bears witness to this.

When I was new to Japan, I studied martial arts in a temple for several years. I remember the teacher and head priest of the temple explaining how within Buddhism there was also a tradition of holding family records for centuries at the temple, but that he had broken that tradition and burnt all the records. He said the records were a source of discrimination as some families layed claim to a higher caste, or more important heritage based on these records.

When will the government take this same step and burn these records leaving it to the individual to decide how they want to embrace their ethnic roots?

After leaving the Sinti-Roma building we went to the main guardhouse. Beside it, in a small yard, 'the wall of death' still stood as it was 50 some odd years ago. Prisoners were taken there and executed as an example to other would-be misbehavers in the camp.

As a group of Israeli students cleared the yard and moved into the building I noticed two old men standing in front of the wall whispering to each other. They were trying to set up some flowers they had brought but the wind kept knocking them over.

It struck me then that the place I was in was not merely something from the movies or a history book. The events that took place here had irrevocably changed the lives of these two human beings in front of me. It had brought them a lifetime of sadness. It was quite real.

I remembered something somebody had said earlier that week in Krakow. "Nowhere is the grass greener than in Auschwitz".

Looking around, it did seem rather green with the strong wind blowing the leaves of the trees and the thick blue grass everywhere.

I noticed another strange thing. There were no birds. There were no chirping sounds. There was just the silence, the sound of the wind though the trees and the whispering prayers of the two old men.

We proceeded into the guardhouse and down into the dark basement. There were many small cells with black iron doors, one of which had a plaque in remembrance of a Catholic priest who had been starved to

death there, in isolation, for speaking out about Auschwitz at a sermon in the town. He had refused to be blinded by the justifications and concessions of the there and then and had paid with his life.

There was also a section with three brick chambers large enough for a man to stand in but not large enough for him to sit down. As punishment the man would have to stand there all night and then go back to work the next day. This was often enough to kill him

The last place we went to was the gas chamber. I felt a little uneasy going in. I wondered if there were ghosts or spirits present and if so were they angry? Were they suffering? Were they confused about why they were there and how their lives had ended?

I closed my eyes and listened to see what I felt. It was not anger or confusion. To the contrary it was a cool, kind, and perhaps even grateful feeling. Perhaps they were thankful to the people who had come all this way to learn their story. Perhaps they knew that something good would come from people having the courage to look directly into the evil. Maybe we could avoid getting trapped in the here and now next time. Maybe we would notice before it was too late.

Maybe even perhaps they somehow knew that I was a teacher and could spread their message even if in only a small way. I felt as if, without any pressure, they were gently asking me to do so. At that point, with my eyes closed, I swore to them that I would. They were thankful.