

Bus Ride of the Living, Or, What I Did on My Summer Vacation

PREEVA TRAMIEL

IF WE ARE NOT HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE, THERE IS NO point learning about the past. Getting out of bed in the morning implies hope for the future, so there IS value in learning about the past. Really, there is. Now you know how I talked myself onto the plane to Eastern Europe. From August 22nd through August 30th, I was part of a 22-member family group that went to Poland to learn about the past on several levels. We went as Jews, to see what place Jews had in the history of Poland, as Poles, to see what place Poland has in the history of Europe and how it is doing now as part of the EU, as descendants of residents of the town of Lodz (pronounced “woodzjh” like the first syllable of “wouldja” as spoken in Brooklyn) to see if anything famous came out of there besides tales of the Lodz ghetto (Jerzy Kozinski and Arthur Rubinstein) and as children and grandchildren of Bubba and Zaida, also known as my mother- and father-in-law, to see the apartment buildings, courtyards and gardens that were the settings of familiar tales. Every one of my husband’s first cousins and every one of my children’s first cousins signed on for the trip, so there were people from New York, Toronto, and California. For 8 days, we drove around central Poland, through the cities of and countryside around Warsaw, Kazimeirz Dolny, Lublin, Lagow, Kracow, Auschwitz, Czestochowa, and Lodz, seeing where the Jews used to live, marveling at how pretty the Polish countryside was, trying to pronounce the names of the towns, bearing witness to the unspeakable horror of the concentration camps, hoping that the Poles who had invited us for the opening of the memorial to the Lodz ghetto and were treating us so nicely really meant it, and fighting over who got the window seats.

My brother-in-law made wonderful arrangements, taking full advantage of the fact that his old rabbi from Japan is now the chief rabbi of Poland. We had a nice bus, with a lovely tour guide named Sebastian who did everything from discuss the economics of whatever town we were in to help us secure lip balm. In every city we got personal tours from specialists in the area’s history. All our guides were very knowledgeable. We even seemed to have special

PREEVA ADLER TRAMIEL's father, Hershl Adler, was a survivor from Munkacs who was born in 1911 and died of cancer in 1975. The Holocaust was a tangible and mysterious presence in her life, even though it was only discussed in Hungarian, Czech, Yiddish, and Hebrew.

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privileges in the concentration camps—gates opened for our bus and we got to ride right up to the main attractions in air-conditioned comfort, which was good—one of my husband Leonard's aunts is in her late 70s.

Poland is no stranger to groups of Jews looking for their roots; the Polish Tourist Organization publishes an excellent map of Jewish Heritage in Poland which marks old synagogues, operating synagogues, cemeteries, concentration camps, death camps (yes, there is a difference), famous centers of Hasidism, and ghettos, copyright 2003. The March of the Living, which brings thousands of students through concentration camps in force before taking them to Israel, has been coming through Poland since 1988. The first time our guide said "matzevah" (memorial), I did a double-take, but I got used to it. Many restaurants knew about kashrut, and called attention to the vegetarian options on their menus. Matzo was not unheard of—several times we found it on the table in the breadbasket (in August!), whether we asked for it or not.

Poland is a country with a lot of pride and a lot of history, and much of that history had Jews in it. The basic "general charters" of the Jews in Poland have their origin in the writ issued in 1264 by Prince Boleslav V the Pious, of Kalisz. Jews were accepted as a group whose main business was money lending against pledges. King Casimir III the Great further solidified their position by broadening the statute of Kalisz in 1334, 1364, and 1367. Poland was a haven for Jews fleeing Germany, Moravia, Bohemia, Spain, and Italy. Despite medieval kingly protections, municipal governments and church authorities oppressed the Jews, and during the various invasions of Poland (too numerous to mention), the Jews suffered. But they increased nevertheless, and grew to a population of over 3 million between the two world wars.

Some towns were one-quarter or one-third Jewish, as were some villages. In 1939, my husband's grandfather joined the Polish army as it marched in a futile attempt to resist the German invasion. Not only were the Poles hopelessly outnumbered, but technology was against them. The Poles sent cavalry on horseback charging against the tanks of the Third Reich. The Polish army brigade in which Leonard's grandfather served was imprisoned in the basement of a cathedral in Czestechowa, immersed in filthy water up to their necks for weeks. We were there, saw the cathedral, and saw the plaque to memorialize the patriots' heroism and suffering.

The last four days of our trip were given over to exploring and experiencing Lodz. The city of Lodz was commemorating the 60th anniversary of the emptying of its ghetto, the last one to be liquidated, of all the ghettos in Europe. One-third of Lodz was Jewish before the war, a population of over 220,000. When oc-

cupied by Germany in September of 1939, Lodz was renamed Litzmannstadt. The ghetto was established in 1940. For four years, with periodic deportations, it served as a center for warehousing and manufacturing wartime products and for concentrating Jews from all over Europe. From the Lodz ghetto, these people were deported to the death camps at Chelmno, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbruck, Sachsenhausen-Orianburg, Gross Rosen, and Stutthof. In August of 1944, 145,000 of its remaining inhabitants were deported to Auschwitz and the ghetto stood empty, except for an 860-person sanitary brigade which had been kept behind to do final clean-up. As part of their work, this brigade dug a series of mass graves for use after their work was done. Those pits are still in the ground around the perimeter of the Jewish cemetery today.

The Jewish cemetery in Lodz is extremely large, and has been extensively restored. It was beautiful to begin with; my mother-in-law remembers going there to play among the *allées* of beech and oak, which are still there today. Some Jews came back to Lodz after the war, and since the Soviet Union took over Poland after World War II, religion of all sorts was forbidden. However, Judaism was an open secret for some. Many more Jews left Poland or went underground in the Soviet purge of the Jews in 1968, but have since re-surfaced. Now, there is a small but growing Jewish population re-establishing itself, helped by the Joint Distribution Committee and various foreign grants.

Some of the Poles in the administration of the city of Lodz, in fact, some Poles all over Poland, are sorry for their complicity in the slaughter of the Jews, and they want the Jews—us—to come back. Today, the residents of Lodz stress “their” ghetto’s historic uniqueness during the years from 1939–1944, as a sort of an urban work camp, and not merely a “death box,” as the other ghettos were. The Lodz ghetto was also used as a place to concentrate the Jews from Central Europe and the Wartheland district, and about 5,000 gypsies. This is why a monument was built at the train station, called the Radegast.

Although I went to Lodz with a bellyful of cynicism, thinking that the 60th anniversary commemoration was a transparent effort to create a tourist business around the Lodz ghetto, a few days there changed my mind. To begin with, much of the Lodz ghetto, and the buildings where Lodz Jews lived, still stand. There also is an untouched synagogue that was preserved in the war with the cooperation of non-Jewish businessmen who used it as a warehouse, while the only Jewish building I saw in Warsaw was the Jewish Studies Institute, and I heard of the Nozyk Synagogue, which was damaged. The rest of the Warsaw Ghetto was bombed into oblivion and paved over. The Lodz cemetery is the

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largest, most beautiful Jewish cemetery I have ever seen. It has many lovely monuments, cool paths, stately trees, unbelievable size, and an open field where people who died in the ghetto are buried, interred so thickly that no trees can grow there despite numerous efforts to plant them. The populace of Lodz came out for the ceremonies, which were numerous and included concerts, photo exhibitions, a parade, and even workshops showcasing Jewish festivals and customs. There were schools of Polish teenagers—Boy Scouts and International Red Cross volunteers—alertly eager to help however they could—they helped elderly guests by pushing them around in wheelchairs, they were always on hand with bottled water, and they gave up their seats on buses and found us seats in crowded auditoriums.

The Mayor of Lodz, Jerzy Kropiwinicki, wrote this beautiful statement, which explained why he and his City Council went through the trouble to build a monument and host extensive ceremonies, concerts, and exhibits commemorating the ghetto, and the Jews, of Lodz.

“I Side with the Victim

On August 29th, 2004 we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto’s final annihilation. This tragedy was especially painful for the city of Lodz—one of the largest Jewish centers in prewar Poland—as that was the end of the Jewish community, which has been living in our city for generations and has been co-creating its history.

As the mayor of Lodz I have believed since the very beginning that the anniversary of the Lodz ghetto’s liquidation should be at last appropriately commemorated. My friend Wladyslaw Bartoszewski drew my attention to its meaning for the Lodz ghetto survivors. He also stressed that so far no adequate attention has been devoted to the tragic fate of the Lodz Jewry that would do justice to the scale of tragedy that befell this community.

On the day the German army entered the city, nearly 250 thousand Jews had been living here constituting a third of our city’s inhabitants. When the Germans retreated from Lodz five years later only a 860 person strong sanitary brigade made of Jews remained in the Ghetto. The quick pace of the war had caused that only several thousand Lodz Jews managed to be saved from death in the camps and in the death marches—a mere five percent of the prewar number. Today the people who lived through that tragedy are over 70 years old and frequently older. They are living in Israel, Western Europe and in America. Many of them are planning to come to Lodz to the celebrations and for the majority of them, this may be the last great trip in their lives. But this is not the only reason why I have decided to extend special care over this year’s commemoration of the Ghetto’s liquidation.

I have been thinking a lot about the situation of a crime witness. When people analyze the question of crime usually they think about the two sides: the executioner and the victim. We rarely realize that there is also a third party—the witness. In Lodz the perpetrators were the Germans, the victims the Jews and the witnesses were those who were not shut in a ghetto, i.e. the Poles. In every crime the roles of the executioner and the victim are fixed forever. The witness stands before an eternal moral challenge—he can either be silent together with the executioner or cry with the victim. In my opinion silence is morally unacceptable. The witness of the crime must cry out.

These are the dimensions of the tragedy which we recollect today, a crime that has been perpetrated on innocent people, on the inhabitants of our city. And we must not be silent about it.”

*Jerzy Kropiwinicki
Mayor of Lodz*

Our group toured around the city of Lodz for three days before August 29th, which was the official date of the memorial, and it was illuminating watching the city get ready. The cemetery was given a thorough weed-whacking. Graffiti was removed from an existing monument to the ghetto, which is a statue of Moses that was put up sometime in the 1960s. Plaques were attached to buildings from the ghetto days. The plaques were made of plastic, and I had serious doubts how long they would last. Our guide, a Lodz native, assured us that the residents of these historic buildings had gotten letters telling them of the significance of their addresses. While we walked around, looking, the residents kept their distance, watching from balconies and windowsills, openly staring. Sometimes a pair of children would come downstairs and say a quiet hello, in English.

We must have presented quite a picture, a herd of 22 Americans and Canadians, wider than we were tall, yakking away in English and Yiddish, pointing and joking and laughing, taking pictures, not staying in an orderly group, peering in windows, reminiscing about the past, critiquing the maintenance and remarking on 60 years of improvements, and generally acting like we owned the place. I was uncomfortable with our boldness, but I followed my father-in-law and his best friend, and my mother-in-law, and her sister, who happily ran around, gaily showing us their old childhood stomping grounds, and acting like we were at a fair.

This was understandable, considering we had just been through Auschwitz. Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II were the largest concentration and death camps in the German system. Birkenau (Auschwitz II), completed in 1944, was the last one finished, and handled the most people of any single location. According to

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our guide, Auschwitz was a center of enormous profits for wartime industrialists and was as much a labor exchange as a killing factory. The two camps are surrounded by an extensive industrial zone, which ran on the slave labor that came out of the camps, and the ground is bumpy with train crossings. Today, Auschwitz is Poland's largest tourist attraction, drawing half a million visitors a year. The two parts of Auschwitz are very different. Auschwitz I, which dates from World War I and looks like an old college campus, is relatively intact, and contains many intimate displays of horrific artifacts. There's a huge roomful of shorn hair, photo exhibits of the transport of Hungarian Jews which had me searching for Adler features (I lost a stepmother, two half-siblings, two aunts, grandparents, and an uncle in Birkenau--more relatives survived their incarceration), a display case of baby clothing, piles of suitcases carefully labeled with their owner's names. Birkenau paralyzes the soul with its scale. It is huge. It is forbidding, and surrounded with concrete stanchions that used to hold electrified barbed wire, and stretch out to the horizons like rows of old women bent over in grief. Even though it is mostly destroyed--the Germans blew up the crematoria before they abandoned the camp in the spring of 1945--you must admire the efficiency of the German design. Train tracks run right down the center of the camp, past endless rows of barracks, and end at a large platform right in front of a small hill. The gas chambers and crematoria are behind that hill, and you can't see it from the train platform. It was on that very platform that Mengele allowed my mother-in-law to stay with her mother, separated my father's sister Blanca from her husband and baby, and separated my father from his parents, in-laws, first wife and children in 1944. When my own children, in 2004, started to run around the platform, I had to stop myself from pulling them away from the tracks. I was shaking.

And that's where we took the official group photo of the trip, on the train platform at Birkenau. Surrounding the four family members who had come there in 1944 as slaves and were returning back 60 years later as honored guests were: TWO generations of children, two tour guides for the day, too much luggage, an air-conditioned bus with special gate opening and path access privileges that assured the passengers they did not have to walk any more than they wanted to. After that picture was taken, the survivors, all in their 70s and 80s, picked up the pace of our expedition, and kept adding more stops to our itinerary while I and the rest of the 40-somethings begged for a rest. Taking that picture shifted the energy, and I puzzled over it for a long time. Weeks after we returned home, I understood why posing for that picture at Birkenau revitalized my in-laws so much. If living well is the best revenge, that photo was proof that my in-laws had theirs, and it was sweet.

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