



Auschwitz: A Reflection

January 27, 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp. Auschwitz was not just one camp. It was a complex of camps that included a concentration camp, killing center, and forced-labor camps. It was located 37 miles west of Krakow (Cracow), near the pre-World War II German-Polish border.

In mid-January 1945, as Soviet forces approached the Auschwitz camp complex, the SS began evacuating Auschwitz and its satellite camps. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced to march west from the Auschwitz camp system. Thousands had been killed in the camps in the days before these death marches began. Tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly Jews, were forced to march to the city of Wodzislaw in the western part of Upper Silesia. SS guards shot anyone who fell behind or could not continue. Prisoners also suffered from the cold weather, starvation, and exposure on these marches. More than 15,000 died during the death marches from Auschwitz. On January 27, 1945, the Soviet army entered Auschwitz and liberated more than 7,000 remaining prisoners, who were mostly ill and dying. It is estimated that at minimum 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945; of these, at least 1.1 million were murdered.ⁱ

In the Preface to his book, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi wrote that Auschwitz “is the product of a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion” and “so long as the conception subsists, the conclusion remains to threaten us.” According to Levi, and he should know because he was one of its survivors, “The story of the death camps should be understood as a sinister alarm-signal.”ⁱⁱ An “alarm signal?” What did Primo Levi mean?

Most historiansⁱⁱⁱ agree that Auschwitz was the outcome of the most murderous legislative document known to European history: the 1935 Nuremberg laws. Overnight, those laws turned

German Jews into biological heretics, into “vermin” to be removed from the so-called Aryan state, that is, Nazi Germany. Never before had a European nation tried to annihilate an entire people. For the Nazis and their collaborators, “Exterminate all the Jews” meant all of them, even newborns, for they, too, were potential enemies of the Third Reich.

Auschwitz should jar our sensibilities, but does it? It is the place where at least 1.1 million people were murdered in cold blood. That alone should be enough to confer notoriety on a location for all time. But the evolution of the camp and its purpose render the statistics of death into something more insidious.

Auschwitz was not a single camp; 39 satellite camps formed its malignant universe. In March 1941, Heinrich Himmler decreed the establishment of a new camp, Auschwitz II (also called Birkenau) to house 100,000 prisoners of war whose capture was anticipated in the forthcoming war on the Soviet Union. When the Russian POWs failed to materialize in such numbers – most starved to death at the hands of the German army in Russia – Slovakian and French Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau instead. The first Jews deported to Auschwitz in early 1942 were used for labor. At that point, the camp was not intended to be part of any apparatus for the systematic annihilation of European Jews

When Auschwitz was integrated into the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” it was by means of improvisation, and not as the result of some carefully thought out plan. That may seem strange to those of us who think of the Germans as a people who do things carefully and methodically. With Auschwitz, however, that wasn’t the case at all. Necessity really did become the mother of invention. Between 1939 and 1941, Nazi Germany invaded and quickly conquered 10 countries in Europe. Millions of Jews were caught in the Nazi maw of death. Many of those not killed on the spot were deported to Auschwitz.

The SS in Auschwitz, faced with the necessity of killing multiple thousands of people in a relatively short time and then having to dispose of large numbers of bodies, made a number of important discoveries and decisions about killing methods. First, they realized that Zyklon-B gas, a pesticide, could be used for homicide. Second, they worked out a means to deliver hundreds of Jews on a daily basis to the gas chambers, kill them and dispose of their bodies as if operating a production line. Third, the SS recognized the potential for supplying cheap labor – slave labor – to business and industry before disposing of the victims once they were “used up.” German businessmen and industrialists got involved. While the building plans for underground mortuaries and adjacent crematoria in Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II (Birkenau) were still at the drafting stage, the SS administration ordered that they be converted into huge killing and disposal facilities. They enticed draftsmen, designers, architects, and technicians in the project. “Decent” men, not psychopaths, organized industrial-scale mass murder – and in the process, made a profit.

Thinking about that reminds me of Alain Renais’s 1956 documentary film, *Night & Fog*. We hear the film’s narrator say that “A concentration camp is built like a grand hotel . . . you need contractors, estimates, competitive bids . . . even friends in high places and maybe a bribe or two,” as we see photographs of civilian businessmen and contractors walking through the developing concentration and death camp grounds, looking at architectural plans and surveying the landscape.

Auschwitz supplied slave labor for coal mines and munitions plants, for factories and quarries. From early on, Auschwitz exemplified the capacity of modern industrial capitalism to coexist happily with, and profit from, a barbaric system of slavery. Numerous German companies exploited the presence of Jews – and others – at Auschwitz. Among them were Bayer, Agfa, BASF, Pelican (which produced the ink to tattoo prisoners), and the most notorious of all, I. G. Farben.

The twentieth century was fraught with atrocity, and the first two decades of the twenty-first do not seem to be much better, but there is a kind of unprecedented horror to what the Nazis did to

the Jews. The industrial exploitation of Jewish slaves and Jewish corpses – their ashes and their teeth – was a uniquely Hitlerian atrocity. At Auschwitz the murder of the Jews was made a civic virtue; and in this way, Germany departed from the community of civilized human beings.

By the time the Soviet Army reached Auschwitz at the end of January 1945, just 75 years ago, more than a million people – mostly Jews, but non-Jews as well – had been murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. The battle-hardened and weary Soviet soldiers were literally shocked at what they found, dead and dying people, filth, ashes, crushed bones, and storehouses of hair, eyeglasses, children's clothing, suitcases, and artificial limbs.

Never again! Those were the words – this was the promise – made with shocked fervor by the victorious Allies 75 years ago after having seen the concentration and death camps Adolf Hitler, the Nazis had spread across Germany and other parts of German occupied Europe.

Those places contained the horrible evidence of an evil the pre-war world had foolishly thought no advanced society was capable of: A campaign of genocide simultaneously masked by the processes of a perverted bureaucratic rationalization and aided by greedy business people out to make a profit. The Third Reich, fueled by ridiculous claims of an Aryan racial purity and racial supremacy, was at bottom a criminal enterprise. It was built on murder; it lived for murder.

On January 27, 2020, 75 years to the day after the Russian Army walked through the gates of Auschwitz in the waning days of the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust, leaders of government, camp survivors, and ordinary people from allied thirty nations will gather in Poland at Auschwitz to mark that long-ago moment when Auschwitz was liberated. World leaders will speak, of course, but will they have anything to say that will make a difference in our world today?

Genocide did not end with the liberation of the Jews and others from the Nazi concentration and death camps, as the West promised it would. Sadly, the world has witnessed other genocides since the end of World War II and the Holocaust, and the likelihood is great that the world will face

more tests of its capacity and willingness to stop genocide. Because the world has not kept its pledge of never again, we must make certain that we never forget what happened during the Holocaust and at places like Auschwitz.

Auschwitz – and all the other concentration and death camps established by the Germans and run by the Nazis and their collaborators – was about human beings: about, how they were to live and die, about how they were to be killed and disposed of. People “learned” many things in Auschwitz: Who was human and who was not; how to remain human and how to become inhuman; how to forget and how to remember.

I have visited the site of Auschwitz on a number of occasions. People ask me what I have learned as a result of my visits to that place in the heart of so-called Christian Europe. I always say that what I would like to learn is how to tell when night has ended and day has begun. What’s that mean, they almost always ask me. I tell them about the rabbi who asked his students the question, “How can you tell when night has ended and day has begun?”

“Teacher,” said one of his students, “you can tell when the night has ended and the day has begun when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a cow or a horse.”

“No,” said the teacher, “that is not correct.”

“When you look in the distance and can tell if it’s an orange tree or an apple tree,” answered another student.

“Wrong again,” said the teacher.

“Well, then, when is it,” they asked. “Tell us, please.”

“You can tell when the night has ended and day has begun,” said the rabbi, when you look into the face of any man and recognize in him your brother, or when you look into the face of any women and recognize in her your sister. If you cannot do that, no matter what time of the day it is by the sun, it is still night.”

I have no idea what all those world leaders are going to say at the events in Poland to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, but I hope they will share with the world, with us, with me how to tell when night has ended and day has begun. And I hope they – and I – will transform that knowledge into action for the betterment of humankind.

—Carol Rittner RSM

Notes

ⁱ See further, “The Liberation of Auschwitz,”

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/liberation-of-auschwitz> (Accessed: 22 December 2019).

ⁱⁱ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, the work of historians such as Yehuda Bauer, Doris Bergen, Lucy Davidowicz, Richard Evans, Raul Hilberg, Martin Gilbert, Ian Kershaw, and Franklin Littell.

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