

A Rabbi goes to Auschwitz

Reflections on January 27th, 2002.

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I have never travelled to Auschwitz by the 'traditional way'; instead, I prefer to take a passenger train. From Berlin - where I live - there are good links by both day and night trains; the only real problem with the latter being that one is woken at the border for the passport controls. But this year, since I work in the Liberal Jewish community in Munich, and January 27th. fell on a Sunday, I had to get a train on Saturday late afternoon - Motzei Shabbat - to Salzburg, change there for a train to Vienna, change stations and catch the night train through to Oswiecim (pronounced "Ozvyenchim"). I travel all over Europe and mostly by train. Despite everything, it is a civilized form of transport and brings you to the city center rather than some scruffy airfield on the outskirts of nowhere. So I am no stranger to night trains.

There is a certain very special and private pleasure each time I buy a Return Ticket to Auschwitz, a pleasure intensified when one sees the old poster in the camp exhibition banning Jews from buying railway tickets on the Nazi "Ostbahn". It really is the most appropriate way to come here - knowing that each bump in the rail, each old brick building, was passed by others over a half century ago. They, of course, did not know where they were heading, nor (most of the time) what exactly awaited them. For them it was just a slow, agonizing, uncomfortable journey with no facilities and no view..... One wonders. Did those who could get to the grill actually follow the route, did they have enough local knowledge to know where they were headed ?

So from München, the former "Hauptstadt der Bewegung", the Capital of the Party, I take a train through Bavaria, through Freilassing (junction for Berchtesgaden) to Salzburg. Here there are only ten minutes to change, but a comfortable Austrian Euro-City express takes me past Linz, Hitler's favourite Austrian city, and then winding through the darkened Wienerwald to Wien.

Vienna sits on the spot where worlds meet. Wien Westbahnhof (West Station) is a part of Western Europe. Here come the luxury trains from Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Belgium..... Wien Südbahnhof (South Station) comes in two parts at two levels. The "Süd" part is a part of Southern Europe; Here the trains leave for Italy and the Mediterranean, for the Balkans - Slovenia, Croatia..... The "Ost" side, in contrast, is already Central Europe. Somehow, I like it. In its dingy post-war reincarnation there is none of the former Imperial magnificence left, more a flavor of the concrete 1950's and the Cold War. Here stood my train - the 21.25 "Chopin", mainly Polish sleeping or couchette through coaches for Warszawa (Warsaw) and for Krakow (Cracow), and even a modern red-white-blue Russian sleeping car for Moskhva (Moscow). (I took one of these once from Brussels to Moscow and back - a very comfortable trip.) On the neighboring track is the evening train for Bratislava - mostly Slovakian coaches, but also an Austrian one and a Ukrainian sleeper for Kiev, with its stove burning coal briquettes, the smell wafting nostalgically under the canopy. Just after we depart, the train of Hungarian coaches from Budapest is due to arrive. Truly this is an international station. One for ordinary travellers, not wealthy tourists.

The couchette for Krakow is almost empty, and I have a six-berth compartment to myself. A blessing, for there is little spare room for luggage. It seems overheated and has the usual semi-faecal and semi-coal-smoke odours of such vintage vehicles. But on a journey like this one does not complain. All things are relative. The Conductor is polite, and notes from his clipboard - "Ah,

the passenger for Oswiecim". He says nothing more, nor do I. There is no need. Who else travels to this place at this time ? He gives me my bedding and leaves me alone.

We set off through the dark over the Donau and along the old Imperial Nordbahn to Lundenburg (now the Czech border town of Breclav), past Strasshof, where the dark engine shed looms - now a museum filled with preserved steam locomotives, it was built with slave labour in the 1940's and, according to some reports, there are still unmarked mass graves on the site. There is History along every kilometer of this route. But soon it is time to try to sleep.....

I awake with a shock. It is 2am., we are at Ostrava (the German "Böhmiches Ostrau"), there is some shunting, then off we go past Bohumin to the border station at Petrovice. Yet more shunting. The platforms are very well lit, there is a busy Police and Customs office on the main platform. Three trains are in at the same time, and our coach is shunted onto another and then back onto a different set - eventually we have a Polish locomotive, two coaches from Prague and two from Vienna; the rest of our coaches have joined various Russian, Czech and Ukrainian vehicles at adjacent platforms. This, of course, will have been the route from Theresienstadt. The Czech and the Polish police come through. Passports, please. Civil. Not threatening. But at 3am. on a dark and very cold January morning, one realizes the coach was not overheated after all - it was just right.

In fact a cold, wet January Sunday is in many respects the best time to visit Auschwitz or Birkenau - there are not many other tourists around, no groups of "March of the Living" teenagers or self-righteous zealots. I am coming here because I have been invited - for the third time - to be "the Jewish representative" at the annual commemoration ceremonies to mark the liberation of the camp on a similar cold January in 1945. The small, elderly and penniless committee of Polish survivors are incredibly grateful that a Rabbi bothers to come - yet it is I who should be grateful for the invitation to perform this mitzvah. Last year my wife and son came too - many of her family, including her father, had come all the way from Westerbork in Holland. Only her father came back, and even that was by foot to Odessa, for repatriation by sea. One doesn't grumble about overheated sleeping cars in such circumstances. Years ago, in Leeds, after a funeral, I found myself talking to a former sailor on the "S.S. Monoway", the ship that made three return trips taking refugees from Odessa to Marseilles, and bringing back Cossack former prisoners-of-war, heading for certain torture and death under the Stalinist regime that branded all who survived the war with the Wehrmacht as "traitors". Whether Soldiers or Slave Laborers, it was classed as a crime to come back alive..... The history of the last century is SO messy. What does "coming home" or "repatriation" mean in such circumstances ?

We crawl now through dark empty stations and past sidings filled with coal wagons; we are running a few minutes late - but then, who wants to rush to Auschwitz ? I am simply glad to be nearly sixty years late. The Polish railways have an enormous backlog of maintenance - truly, those who are afraid of high speeds need not worry here. But they function. At 04.33, six minutes behind schedule after a journey across half of Europe, I am the only one to alight at Oswiecim, a seven-platform junction station with lines heading four ways. Maybe those who criticize that "the railway to Auschwitz should have been bombed" ought to look at a railway map. The countryside is mainly fairly flat and featureless; there are a few bridges over rivers, but nothing that could, even if bombed, not have been repaired within three days under war conditions. This was - and still is - an incredibly busy network of lines, serving coal mines, power stations, a major locomotive

works at Chrzanow, a sugar factory..... Far too strategically important, and with far too many loop lines and duplicate routes, to be severed for long. And as for the trains already under way, from Westerbork, from Drancy, from Saloniki - they would have got through, with little delay. Railwaymen on all sides pride themselves on things like that. The story of British and American railway engineers restoring blasted tunnels and demolished bridges, of restoring blitzed lines and yards, is one of amazing achievement under great pressure. Germans, Poles and Russians - they were no slouches, either. So I really doubt whether a single life would have been saved, whether a single additional person would have been given pause for thought, would have feared that "the Allies know what we are doing". Sorry if this shatters an illusion - but that's the way it is, when one bothers to read some history. Apparently the main threat to crippling the Nazi supply lines came with the dropping of mines into the Danube - the loss of barges carrying oil from Romania was severe, and the river was harder to clear of wrecks than any railway marshalling yard.

Even on a Sunday there are some early-morning commuters on the bare platforms. I walk over the windy footbridge to check a hunch, and find I am right - the old black wartime 2-10-0 steam locomotive that had been rusting under a blanket of snow in January 2000, and which I did not have time to check in the foggy January 2001, has indeed gone, vanished. A pity. It would have been an impressive exhibit. In the garden of a railway house is a restored kilometer post: "350 kil. von Wien." A reminder that this was the old main line, Vienna - Cracow.

At 7, as planned, I meet up with a Polish Catholic friend from Berlin, and we head on foot for the "Auschwitz I" camp, only ten minutes away. The locals are very keen always to point out that they live in "Oswiecim", that "Auschwitz" was a purely German creation. My friend has a girl friend from this dingy and muddy little town - she hates saying where she comes from. One day, he told me, another girl on the train asked her, and laughed at the reply; Never having had this response before, she asked why? It turned out, the other girl came from the village of Treblinka..... What it must be, to carry a Brand of Cain on your very birth certificate.

But - for those who come for the first time - it is always a shock to note that this camp, this notorious place, was at the edge of a town, a town that has since expanded almost to surround it. Like that at Dachau, too. Mauthausen perches on a hilltop, Neuengamme was in the marshland south of Hamburg, Dora in wooded isolated valleys in Thüringen - but here, there are urban buses passing by the gate, and one can understand not only the outrage of those who complain, but also the human needs of those who live here, when from time to time a proposal emerges for a supermarket or a disco in the locality. Of course it is Bad Taste - but what is the alternative? To raze the entire town? For better or worse, people live and work here, too. The bus depot is just up the road.

Red and white Polish flags fly from lamp standards. This is not only the Liberation Day but the Polish National Day of Mourning. The complex of brick two-storey blocks was originally a large garrison, an extensive set of barracks for Galician officers who must have had a frightfully boring existence under the sullen Silesian sky. Barracks, store rooms, a rail siding connection at a strategic junction - it formed the perfect site for the purpose. But the new inhabitants were there to be tortured and starved and humiliated and murdered in myriad and inventive ways.

A small group has gathered. There is a brief ceremony at the Wall of Death. A small courtyard between Blocks, the windows on one side boarded over, the upper windows on the other half bricked up, posts stand there with metal hooks - from here the people were hung by their arms. Including the man who comes forward now with a wreath - an early political prisoner

with an early, three-digit number, my friend informs me; somehow he survived, somehow he helped later to organize a group to form a committee to preserve this place when no-one else was interested - at the outset the volunteers had to lodge in Hoess's former house, use the same bath the Commandant had used.... Brief speeches are made, all in Polish - by people who suffered here, by people whose parents or grandparents were shot here, by a former Kindergarten teacher, two of whose children were shot here.... A trumpet is blown, three drummers beat a rhythm, candles in red glasses are laid; then the wreaths come, scores of them, the wreath-layers formed up in rows four abreast. I notice one on behalf of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland, one on behalf of the city of Wolfsburg, home of Volkswagen.....

We clergy are to speak and pray later, but there is time for a quiet Kaddish before we are led to buses and driven the short distance to the Auschwitz-II Birkenau complex, enormous and empty as we march in procession down the main access road, parallel to the ramp, to the sidings, the most famous stretch of railway in the world. At the end, between the ruins of demolished crematoria, the International Memorial rises dark and threatening. Israel's Ambassador, Sheva Weiss, delivers a passionate and fluent oration in Polish - I understand everything, though I do not understand a word. Then more wreaths, while the cold wind blows. How could people stand still here at Appell for hours at a time, without the benefit of coats and breakfast? Two years ago I watched as three members of the Polish Army Honor Guard, fittest of the fit and in full winter uniform, keeled over during the ceremony and had to be bundled into waiting army ambulances and treated for the cold.

It turns out, the organizer explains, that we "religious" are to say our prayers into microphones on a podium near the crematorium. Will God hear any better? Does it matter now anyway? The survivors are ailing now, many bent, with sticks, and they sit on rows of wooden folding chairs. There will not be many more years before this committee will either vanish or need to be reborn.

So we take our places - a local Catholic priest; my friend the German Catholic layman; myself, a British-born Reform Rabbi; and - and a Polish Buddhist! This year it seems the Polish Protestant bishop and the Orthodox priest could not come. So we step to the microphones.

And the heavens suddenly open. They weep with us. Strong winds nearly blow my siddur out of my hands, I have to clutch my hat. My siddur is soggy within minutes. But somehow I read the Prayer for the Six Million, in German as well as English - very deliberately, for I think it is important that a Rabbi from Berlin should recite Jewish prayers in German here, a place to which so many German Jews came, from the Gr unewald and Putlitzstrasse freight yards. German is not JUST the language of Eichmann and Mengele. I add "El Maleh Rachamim", the wind whipping the words away as I sing, and end with a Kaddish.

It is done. The dead have been honored, but have not gone away They stay here still, somehow. But the journalists and the TV crews pack up, the elderly survivors shuffle off and disperse, my task is accomplished. There are no more speeches, no air-conditioned buses, no banquet. I may go.

As I have some time I explore a little further than last year, and then walk along the rotting railway tracks from the end past the ramp to the gate, from the gate across the road, and then there is a jungle, knee-high snow and mud, trees growing over and through the tracks. Nothing has rolled over here for years. But I persevere, interested in following the trail. My soggy coat gets

covered in burrs and brambles, my shoes are not suitable for this quagmire. Two fences block my way and force a detour along a muddy field. It seems that the owner of Ulica Pivnicza 12 has extended his garden across the disused tracks. The trail is regained and followed through high dead grass to the spot where it joined the main system at the edge of a set of sidings. Here I find "The point of No Return", the point - Americans would call it a 'switch' - which directed the loaded trains onto this short spur, the destination always visible across the fields. I am fascinated by the details - this is a very specific form of industrial archaeology, the industry in this case being Death. The line was laid only in 1944 to increase efficiency - until this point the victims had to march the distance I have just walked, maybe 2 kilometers. The layout of the tracks does not make sense at first, then it becomes clear that a point has been removed, that here was the spot where locomotives would uncouple and here they would have run round so as to be able to haul their trains into the rearward-facing spur. I find the remains of the little cabin where the pointsman no doubt sat on cold days. This was a well-organized and well-constructed system, designed for heavy traffic.....

I have seen what there is to see, and it is not long now, between the rain showers, to the station, passing on the way the spot where the 1.5 kilometer long spur line to 'Auschwitz I' used to link to the goods yard - part of the track lies there still, and the buffers at the end, but a road has been built over the section by the station, cutting it off. While awaiting our train, my friend and I discuss Theology. Where was God when Cain killed Abel? Why did God not protect Abel? What is the point of punishing Cain when it is too late? Is there any point in vengeance, or is it just a preventative measure? Catholics believe in a God who was prepared to watch his own son be nailed to a plank of wood - out of Love. How can Jews relate to such a belief? Or to any belief?

And eventually my train to Krakow comes in - only a humble country stopping train, but that most important of all symbols - the train away from here, away from here, away from here.....

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