
A Personal Memoir

Auschwitz at 16, Auschwitz at 61

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"It might be surprising that in the camps one of the most frequent states of mind was curiosity. And yet, besides being frightened, humiliated, and desperate, we were curious: hungry for bread and also to understand. The world around us was upside down and so somebody must have turned it upside down, and for that reason he himself must have been upside down: one, a thousand, a million anti-human beings created to twist that which was straight, to befoul that which was clean." Thus starts a short story by Primo Levi, the Italian writer and a co-survivor of Auschwitz.

I had just turned 16 when I was brought into Auschwitz, and I too was driven by an intense curiosity to make sense of what was happening around me. At 61, it is still curiosity about human behavior under hardship conditions, now motivated by the urge to prevent the world from going upside down again, that drives my psychotherapy practice. To document briefly my persona, and professional journey through these mirror years, I want to speak to those incidents that have impacted the attitudes and techniques I share with my patients, many of whom are survivors of calamitous events in their own life.

It was through a series of affective and cognitive steps that, in the repressive environment of Auschwitz, I went from feeling myself victimized by our keepers to the realization that I quite possibly had the inner resources to outlast them. That somehow I could match their collective decision to eliminate us a human beings and Jews with my determination to live. What Dr. A. Kornhaber calls the "will to existence" was born, I believe, out of the despair of seeing your mother escorted to the gas chambers leaving me and my sister Magda to carry out her exhortation to live a full life: "Remember, what you put inside your brain, no one can take away."

So even as I put on a striped uniform and submitted my hair to the razor, I mentally committed to a return to normalcy, home and my training classes in gymnastics and dance. Shortly, after we arrived, a Nazi officer came to greet the newcomers and asked what "talents" we had brought to the camp. My inmates pushed me forward. With my eyes closed, I am Juliet on the Budapest Opera House stage starting a mournful dance above the body of Romeo. That evening, I discovered the power of "doing within when you are without." Our barracks received some extra rations that day, but the critic's choice could have been quite different: the Nazi officer was none other than the infamous Dr. Mengele, who was known to send people to the "showers" for a loose shoelace.

It is small wonder that when life and death become as casual as flipping a coin, personality should undergo radical changes? The tenets of "good behavior" learned in my sheltered girlhood were replaced by a kind of animal quiver, which instantly smelled out danger and acted to deflect it. During a work detail my sister was assigned to a brigade that was to leave for another camp. I could not let this happen and

suddenly cartwheeled to her side. I thought I noticed a hint of bemusement on the face of a guard who then turned the other way and let me be. To confront fear and take action helped me fight off the numbness that a persistent contact with arbitrary authority can create. Learning to face the fear and do it anyway became an effective technique to recapture self-esteem, which I would later share with my dysfunctional patients. In our "upside-down" world while we dreamed of freedom, we also dreaded it. When the U.S. Army liberated the camps and opened the gates, the inmates rushed forward but most retreated and even returned to their barracks. Can we talk of addiction to suffering? As we know, the battered wife's syndrome reveals similar pattern of desire and dread that the situation could change.

For me, and – as later studies proved – for many survivors, liberation did not bring an end to anxiety. A war prisoner is sustained by the knowledge that family and country continue to exist and await his return. The survivor, especially if he was Jewish, had no such comfort. His family has been decimated sometimes in his very presence; his home ransacked; his country did not recognize him as one of its citizens. When after several months in the hospital, I returned to my hometown of Kassa on the Hungarian-Czech border (out of 15,000 deportees, 70 returned), a neighbor greeted me on the street: "Surprised to see you made it. You were already such a skinny kid when you left . . ."

Before I was 20, I had come to the conclusion that adversity was what life was all about. However, I was also convinced that the power was within each of us to use adversity to advantage. In the hospital, I had met a young Czech freedom fighter and we decided to marry. I became pregnant shortly afterwards and doctors advised against carry out the pregnancy. Their advice was ignored and we left for the United States with a two-month old girl and not a penny in our pocket. I became the breadwinner. Little by little I began turning away from myself. We were struggling to learn to live in another language and that seemed to take up most of my energies. Somehow, the Auschwitz experience no longer seemed relevant. The time had come for silence and denial – neither victim nor survivor, just another immigrant trying to make the grade in the American melting pot.

However, as our financial situation eased, my restlessness and dissatisfaction increased. In my fortieth year, I decided to return to school and pursue studies in psychology. These, of course, compelled me to delve into my own history, and those 15 months of abjection and horror. Under the guidance of my teachers at the University of Texas El Paso, I developed and documented the calamitous theory of growth, which attempts to measure how victims of concentration camps cope in the short and long term.

Intellectually, I had fulfilled my mother's wish but did not feel redeemed. In 1990, I traveled back to Auschwitz on those same railroad tracks that brought countless thousands to their death. I came to mourn the dead and celebrate the living. I also needed to formally put an end to the denial that I had been a victim and to assign guilt to the oppressor. I needed to touch the walls and smell the latrine to re-experience my own reality, to de-grief, so to speak.

It is not always possible for victims to return to the place where pain was visited upon them, but I encourage patients to re-live the dreadful events in as much detail as memory can muster, all the while observing intently their own emotional and physical reactions. The next step in recovery often comes from going public with one's affliction, not just as a personal catharsis but in the hope that others can benefit from it. When I asked an audience of some 300 Texas University how many knew what happened at Auschwitz, four hands went up. It was then that I decided to "go public" with my story. I hope that some day, when they are ready, my grandchildren will have the curiosity to ask their grandmother questions about the time when the world was upside down. So that if it starts tilting again, they and millions of others can redress it before it is too late.