

Yom HaShoah 5778
From Darkness to Light

The theme of light and dark overshadowed my two pilgrimages to Auschwitz and Birkenau, first in the fall of 2012 and then in the summer of 2015. On both occasions the day dawned clear and bright, the temperature seasonable for that time of year.

Oddly, as each day progressed, the sky darkened and a cold mist fell. It seemed fitting that the weather turned, reflecting the oppressive mood that these former Nazi concentration and extermination camps evoke.

For most of my life I had no intention to visit Central or Eastern Europe. On the contrary, I went out of my way to avoid even a layover in a German or Austrian or Polish airport. What's not important is why I eventually decided to travel to Eastern Europe. Rather, what's important are the feelings that being there evoked. On the one hand, I was curious to visit the countries from which my family immigrated to the United States. On the other hand, I was repulsed by the knowledge of what took place there during the Nazi's reign of evil.

If you've visited Auschwitz in the last 5 years, you're familiar with an exhibit installed by Yad Vashem in one of the former prison barracks. The exhibit is called *SHOAH, The New Permanent Exhibition in Block 27 at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum*. To say that the exhibit is beautiful sounds like an oxymoron, but it's esthetically brilliant and emotionally heart-wrenching. In the middle of one room are hundreds of sheaves of oversized parchment seemingly suspended in mid-air. On both sides of each single-spaced sheaf are lists of names, as well as the date of birth, the place of birth, and the place of death of each individual. All were victims of the Shoah.

On my visit to Auschwitz in 2015, I looked up my maternal grandmother's maiden name, Fetner, since it's less common than my other grandparents' names. According to my father, my grandmother was from a town called Horodenka. It sounds like a made-up place, a fictional shtetl like Tevye's Anatevka. My dad had no clue where Horodenka was. But now I do, and I

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know that during the war the Nazis established a ghetto there, and I know that 69 members of my grandmother's Fetner family were murdered by the Nazis, victims of the Shoah.

It was with this dark knowledge hovering like a cloud that I made my way from exhibit to exhibit at Auschwitz. I could barely read any of the displays or process any of the information. The revelation about my family was too shocking. Absentmindedly climbing a narrow staircase in one of the barracks, I stopped suddenly and burst into tears as I came face to face with a female officer of the Israel Defense Forces. She was talking quietly on her phone. I caught her attention and then, with tears streaming down my face, thanked her in Hebrew for making sure that such a nightmare as the Holocaust never would happen again. I thanked her for protecting us, for protecting Israel, for protecting Jews worldwide. With a gentle smile, she reached out and hugged me, as she whispered one simple word: *b'vakashah*, you're welcome.

From that moment on, my visit to Auschwitz took on a new perspective. Yes, I toured the ghastly exhibits. Yes, I listened as the docent described the unspeakable atrocities, the Nazis' heinous crimes against humanity. But I was completely distracted as suddenly, all over the place, I saw men and women, young soldiers and veteran officers, proudly wearing the uniforms of the Israel Defense Forces.

Later at Birkenau I was a tour guide's least cooperative participant. Without telling her, I ditched our group, backtracking along the seemingly endless train tracks we'd just traversed. What had caught my eye were IDF troops marching through the gates of the camp, led in procession by an honor guard proudly hoisting the flag of the State of Israel. As they came to a halt and stood at attention, a small military band played the stirring notes of HaTikvah. As if on cue, the misty clouds parted and the rays of a warm, summer sun burst forth from heaven.

From darkness to light, from death to life. We remember with love the victims of the Shoah. And we acknowledge with love and gratitude the men and women who make sure that never again will we need to say, "Never again!"