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POSTSCRIPT FROM
AUSCHWITZ

BY MARK B. ROSENBERG

Our family (Mark, Rosalie, Benjamin and Ginelle) had
the opportunity to visit Auschwitz, the Nazi concen-
tration camp located near Oswiecim in southern
Poland during Ginelle’s Bat Mitzvah trip to Budapest,
Crakow and Prague (July 3-14, 2002). It took me two
sleepless nights to distill all the emotions and
thoughts from this visit into three observations.
1. It should not have taken me 52 years to get to Auschwitz.

Following our July 10, 2002 afternoon visit to the camp, it took me a lot of time to construct this statement as an accurate reflection of my feelings about the visit. Note that I take personal responsibility for not getting there. I have done some traveling—mostly in the Western Hemisphere, but simply did not take the time to get to the place that was so critical to our family’s roots. My parents did as much as they could to educate me about the horrors of World War II (Mom is an Auschwitz survivor willing to share her dreadful experiences, and Dad was a proud decorated US war veteran).

I have read countless books about the War and the Holocaust, been to numerous memorials and museums (Yad Vashem, Miami Beach, St. Petersburg, FL), but there is nothing like being there. Both Auschwitz itself and its sister camp—nearby Birkenau—overwhelm the senses, particularly our emotional intelligence.

An earlier visit to Auschwitz would have helped me to develop even greater appreciation for my mother’s survival and being.

An earlier visit to this center of genocide would have helped me to put in greater perspective the long struggle for survival of the Jewish people.

An earlier visit to this center of extermination would have allowed me greater appreciation for the perils of the collapse of civil society.

In sum, an earlier visit to Auschwitz would have made me a better son, a better Jew, and a better human being. Fortunately it is not too late in any of these dimensions.

2. In Auschwitz, one is face to face with unparalleled institutional and bureaucratic evil that is ruthless, remorseless, and infinitely inhumane.
It’s not just because nearly two million people lost their lives there, or indeed because the camp itself was one of the most significant slave labor centers in all of modern history.

THE STORY MUST BE TOLD AND RETOLD.

"Why here?" The guide gave a multi-answered response – highlighted by the Nazi propensity for efficiency. The area was a convergence point for the railway, bringing east and west together in an unprecedented pivot of death. Railway tracks led to the main entrance of Auschwitz-Birkenau. On these tracks, hundreds of deportation trains from all over Europe, carried a million and a half Jews to be gassed.

True, Auschwitz itself served as a Polish military barracks prior to the Blitzkrieg. It then evolved from a camp for Polish POWs to a key component of the Germanization of Silesia and all of Eastern Europe.

Nearby Birkenau emerges only after the Nazi’s firmed up their commitment to massify human suffering and genocide. If Auschwitz is grim, the latter is unprecedented organized savagery. To think that civilized, educated people could have created this evil machine.

3. The story of what the Nazis did — not just to Jews — but to anyone in their way (Gypsies, Catholics, humanitarians, dogooders, youth, the aged) must be told and retold.

It must be told and retold because it can happen again — not just to Jews but also to others. Indeed, there have been other holocausts: among them the centuries-long slave transports from West Africa to this continent; or the killing fields of Cambodia; or more recently the tragic slaughter as a consequence of the Bosnian-Serbian conflict.

A critical component of Nazi genocide was hate. But what empowered this component was technology — to make mass murder feasible — and the silence of thoughtful people who know better. It is the latter that worries me. That is why the story must be told and retold.

Critical to this is our younger generation, those who will have the opportunity to make the world a better place as they assume family and community leadership responsibilities. The visit of Benjamin and Ginelle to Auschwitz (on the heels of an earlier trip to Israel) gives me some assurance that they now better understand just how bad things can get, and just how real this can be. With this now firmly etched in their minds, the world might be a little better off in the future particularly if they tell the story to their peers in their language. Eilat Va-dor-from generation to generation.

The trip to Auschwitz has enabled us to connect in a profoundly gripping way to our humanity and to our family. I am grateful for the opportunity to have made the trip and want to apologize to all for not having gotten there sooner.

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