

Remembrance of Jews past, but never lost

Jerry Krase (February 01, 2009)



Being reminded of International Holocaust Remembrance Day makes me recall many things... past present and future..



This special focus on i-Italy reminded me of times past, so I visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on line and found this there about INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY:

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly designated January 27 as an annual international day of commemoration to honor the victims of the Nazi era. This date marks the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp. Every member nation of the U.N. has an obligation to honor the memory of Holocaust victims and develop educational programs as part of the resolve to help prevent future acts of genocide. The U.N. resolution rejects denial of the Holocaust, and condemns discrimination and violence based on religion or ethnicity. To commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Museum hosts a candle-lighting ceremony attended by the Washington, D.C. diplomatic community, Holocaust survivors, and the general public. It had [this place](#) [2] to reflect and write. This is what I wrote:





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"As many other children who grew up in Brooklyn after World War II the Holocaust (Shoah) was recounted to us, unuttered, in sights and scenes such as the blue tattoos that inexplicably appeared on the arms of people, and the overcrowded apartments of friends who were sharing their everything with newly arrived relatives (I supposed) who spoke with "funny accents." As children we didn't know the meanings of it, but we knew enough not to ask. As an adult I know, and wish I didn't."

In Brooklyn we lived the Holocaust everyday as matter of course. Many parts of the borough especially Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, Borough Park, Bensonhurst, and Brownsville were peopled with those who had escaped before it began or those coming to the United States after it ended from numerous D.P. (Displaced Persons) camps. Those who hardly "survived" concentration camps such as Buchenwald, Bergen/Belton, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, or whole cities such as Warsaw, Budapest, or Vilna, came to live, work and sometimes even start new families here. Almost all of the newcomers had families in Brooklyn and if not, they found others, or each other, to begin new lives. That is why being "Brooklyn" is also being not a little bit Jewish, and why before there was a New York State mandated Holocaust Curriculum, we learned about it in school as well as out of it.

I could spend the rest of life writing about Jews to whom I am in one sense of another "connected," beginning with the family of one of my first best friends - Ikey (I assume Isaac) August - who lived, like me, in the Red Hook (low income) Housing Project. Ikey's father worked in a bakery and, therefore, gave my family of seven children, and two occasionally employed adults, bagels, onion rolls, and bialys to eat. Having Jews as good friends and neighbors was multigenerational. My Sicilian American mother told me she was spat upon by her Gentile Greenpoint neighbors because her father was a landlord there. There were few Sicilians around then and her best friend and Public School-mate was a Jewish girl whose dad owned a beer garden. My dad, however, was never so open minded. I think he believed that Jews wore hats to cover the horns on their heads, and he also thought they were especially "lucky." He never understood the Yiddish phrase - "Nil sine magno labore."

I wrote the following for The Brooklyn Free Press in 1997, and it should now be placed here with the image it refers to.

Shoes! by Jerry Krase

It's Rosh Hashana and Brooklyn College is closed so I don't have to teach classes today, so I can catch up on my writing, so I'm reading Newsday and looking for little bits for my Free Press piece on the dismal New York City mayoral elections and simultaneously listening to the replacement liberal talk-show host for Brian Lehrer (who's also taking the day off) on WNYC interview a general who just published a book on the danger of nuclear weapons for the future of world peace answer a question from a caller about why the United States dropped an atomic bomb on two targets in Japan even though they knew they were in the middle of a neighborhood filled with "innocent" civilians.

While the general is talking about the problem of "ancillary" damage the caller says there must have been some place where THE BOMB could have been dropped without slaughtering civilians and still have made the point and the general mumbled about "American" casualties.

Good thing that the caller didn't ask the general why, in contrast, during the same World War II in Europe the Allies said they didn't bomb near the German concentration camps because of the problem of potential "ancillary" damage, which incidentally made it possible for me and two of my daughters to experience a "perfectly preserved" Auschwitz when they came to visit me in Poland last Spring. I waited for Kristin and Karen to get to Krakow because I was afraid to go alone. We went to pay respects to the families of too many of our friends who lost a piece of themselves in the



Holocaust.

My connection to the Holocaust is Growing up Gentile in Brooklyn and I remember things like when I was very little asking my mother to explain "it" after coming across photographs of concentration camp victims in a magazine, and as a teenager delivering orders to people with blue tattoos on their wrists or forearms. In Brooklyn you can't avoid "it" and "its" repercussions; like Max and Helen, survivors of Buchenwald, who owned a coffee shop I used to frequent who always kwelled over my children when I brought them in with me to share my "Breakfast Special".

Well the point is that when we got to Auschwitz and passed through the Arbeit Macht Frei portal I tried to find something small enough to comprehend. A one-piece-at-a-time-kind-of-thing that could be slowly added up to millions allowing me to remember without being totally overwhelmed by grief and shame for being a member of the human race.

I found "it" in a mound of shoes behind the glass of an exhibit of the "personal effects" taken from people before they were gassed and their bodies incinerated. I took out my memo pad and quickly drew a picture of one shoe which caught my eye. It was tiny; a young girl's red and white leather open-toed shoe with a slightly elevated wedged heel. It was the kind of shoe my wife and I might have bought for our daughters to wear for their high school graduation and about which they would complain as not being "in style". I imagined that this barefoot child and her mother spent their last moments together in the same room that later I also entered- and then walked out of- with my own children. Shoes!

PS: I don't have the time right now, or the patience ever, to comment, without rage and profanity, on Pope Benedict XVI's reinstatement of an excommunicated Bishop (Richard Williamson) who seems to take pleasure in the notoriety he is receiving, again, for denying what we in Brooklyn have known since we were kids. I have never been a very good Catholic and such actions on the part of someone who claims infallibility of one sort or another makes it increasingly unlikely that I ever will be. Shalom (Pace)

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- [3] <http://www.i-italy.org/specials/society/memoria-al-futuro-remembrance-day-nyc>
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