

Reflections and Reminders from Auschwitz – January 14, 2011

This place is so familiar I know I've been here before. I've been here in Germany...and Cambodia...and Rwanda. I've visited in photos and stories and statistics. It's always the same. It's always new. It's always raw.

We pass under those infamous words of twisted metal and cross over the roll call area, where prisoners were forced to stand for up to twelve hours in rain and snow until all were accounted for. We walk past the gallows, the execution courtyard, the now-shuttered Block 10 where "The Angel of Death" performed his medical experiments. We walk through room after room containing the vestiges of human cruelty: piles of rusted cyanide canisters, of children's shoes, of hair shorn off bodies and bound for tailors' shops.

I visit the gas chambers. I've seen them in Dachau but that doesn't help, it doesn't stop me from imagining the scene of almost a thousand people packed into a dark chamber the size of a racquetball court, it doesn't stop me from trying to get inside each of their heads as the gas pours out, from trying to imagine what I would do in those last moments. I step next door and find three ovens, carts and tracks installed in front of them. Within a year this wasn't efficient enough, and four more chambers were built in Auschwitz II.

But, as always, it's not what happened here--but who it happened to--that rips away my last bit of resolve and moves me to tears. It's the photo of 69-year-old Ewa Nicpon, whose fear pierces through her wrinkles, and Jozef Kasak, a Polish carpenter ten years younger than I. It's the helplessness smeared across the face of a nameless Jewish father surrounded by a wife and daughters soon to be ripped away from him. The emaciated face of a two-year-old--a triplet who underwent medical experimentation--and a ten-year-old whose twin died shortly after the camp's "liberation." Kids who stare out from behind the barbed wire, their young eyes making clear that there's no forgetting.

Some faces are already beaten, some reflect only terror, some--like Teofil Dziana, a member of the resistance--hold their heads up high, and I cling to a meager amount of pride for that small act of rebellion; sometimes in a place that heralded so much death, that's all there is to hold onto. Their faces will be forever etched in my mind but I still find myself trying to scribble down as many names as I can because maybe if I can say, "Mariam Grabowski, I remember you," it'll make some difference.

My students and I were discussing human nature a few weeks ago, and how it's not the Hitlers and Mother Teresas that inform our beliefs about it. Hitler's a mere person, a voice; it's not him that shakes my faith in humanity. It's that countless others made the decision to follow that voice. It's that a guard could murder a dozen prisoners and then go home and hug his daughter*. It's that a doctor who swore to protect human life could send a swath of naked old women to the "showers" with a flick of his hand. It's that we can learn so much about the massacres at Auschwitz and Dachau and Tuol Sleng and Rwanda and still insult the memory of all those who died there by treating people like trash--just because we had a bad day.

Auschwitz is not some static memorial we can hold at arm's length, a simple reminder of what the *Nazis did* to Jews and Poles, gypsies and gays. It's a reminder of what happens when everyday people use fear and anger and ignorance to dehumanize, a reminder that how we treat our neighbor--at the grocery store or half a world away--makes a difference.

Genocide never starts with the gas chambers.

Over the years a number of people have questioned--sometimes caustically--why I visit places like this. Sometimes I snap back that it's because I never got a passport to isolate myself, or that turning away from horrors like this are how they happen in the first place. But deep down, I think I go because I need to prove to myself that my faith in humanity--my strong-held belief that "people are truly good at heart"--is not based on sheltered platitudes...or by turning away. I need to know that I can walk away from a place like Auschwitz and still believe with all of my being that the good in this world far outshines the bad, that the cruelty exhibited in places like this stands out not because it's the rule but because it's the exception.

I know full well that that "good" is not a given--it's a responsibility. And I know that those exceptions will always feel raw, will always shake my faith, will always bring me to tears. And that's okay. Because I also know that those moments of doubt will always be overcome by the memory of all the kindness and compassion and amazing people I've encountered in my thirty years, those simple, everyday courtesies that constantly remind me: there is still so much good in this world.

And so I step back under that twisted metal with tears in my eyes but with an emotion that laughs in the face of Hitler and hate and all who would subscribe to them.

I leave Auschwitz with hope.