

The Trees Bore Silent Witness

Poland, July, 2013

We have come to see what has become of the Jews of this land.....

The cemetery in Warsaw....

.... is vast, bearing testimony to a long and thriving history.

How many generations of righteous men and women are buried on these grounds, oh G-d?

Rabbis and scholars, writers and artists, philanthropists, doctors and mohels, and women who were generous with their tzedakah.

More than a millennium ago it was that You, oh G-d, gave a message to the wandering Jews of Europe:

"Po-Lin", You told them—"rest here, and life will be good for you".

Who would have believed then that one day this promise would expire?

"When you besiege a city...do not destroy its trees."

You have forbidden us to cut down trees without reason.....

How many graves in this cemetery, oh G-d, show headstones with trees snapped in half, or tree trunks with no roots or limbs?



Just as the life of these trees was cut short, the occupants of these graves were deprived of bearing fruit.....

The Umschlagplatz.....

.....The gathering point. Over 300,000 Jews began their final journey from this spot, boarding the trains which would take them for "resettlement."

The arch over the memorial shows a field of broken trees.



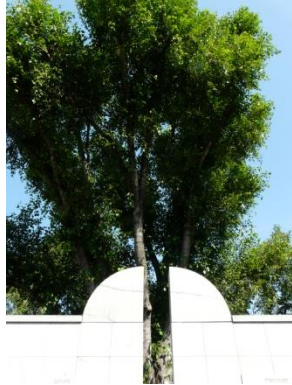
The memorial itself is broken in two; we all looked to see if our names were on the list of common first names carved into the walls.

I found mine. How many Margalit's were taken from this spot, oh G-d? And was any of them like me?



But wait—look between the shattered pieces of the memorial and what do we see?

A LIVING tree, towering high over the carved stones! As if to say, “we are still



here.”

A beautiful message no doubt. But we would have preferred, oh G-d, for there to have been no umschlagplatz, no rail cars, no transports, no

Majdanek....

As we entered the parking lot, there was a large tree lying on the ground. Its leaves were all attached still, but it was bent and broken right at its base.



It was warning us. "Beware of what you will see when you enter this place. For you will never be the same."

Like those who came before us, we did not heed the warning....

The monument at the entrance to the camp warned us that the way in was not difficult, descending on an easy incline; once there, however, the way out was a steep staircase, almost impossible to navigate.

Still we continued on.....

We entered the gas chambers, with their blue stained walls; saw the unused cans of zyklon-B, and the shower heads waiting to receive them.

We saw thousands upon thousands of shoes—a whole barracks filled with them! Each one had a story to tell. Some looked like my shoes. Some must surely have belonged to another Margalit.

We entered the crematorium and looked into the ovens which turned so many thousands of people—Your people, oh G-d—into ashes that rained from the sky.

"Etz chaim he—It is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it."

In Majdanek, oh G-d, the Nazis made a liar out of You.

Many held fast to Your Torah, many quickly abandoned it.

In the end it did not matter. As long as the sap which ran through their veins was comprised of Jewish blood, it became a tree of death to them.

As we approached the end of the path, we saw another tree. This one was vibrant and full of leaves, and tall—so tall!! Surely it must be more than 70 years old.



What unspeakable horrors have you witnessed, tree? Were you here during the Harvest Festival, when over 42,000 Jews were slaughtered in one day, 18,000 of them right here at this spot?

If you could talk, what would you tell us? And would we have the strength to listen?

Auschwitz/Birkenau---

Graceful willow trees stood beside the path as we entered the grounds of the



camp.

Passing through the gate, we were greeted by tall, leafy trees which obscured part of the infamous mocking sign “Arbeit Macht Frei”—“Work will make you



free”.

The “streets” we walked on looked like they could have been a college campus; the trees which lined them silent partners to the deception.



We saw the barracks where 500 human beings were crammed in a space meant for 50 horses.

We saw the block where cruel medical experiments were performed by those whose Hippocratic oath had become the oath of a hypocrite.

We saw the wall where prisoners were murdered by firing squads, and the gallows used for others, making them ominous warnings of what punishments awaited those who committed the smallest of “crimes”.

And then we entered a building we were told contained “material proofs of crimes.” And what did we see there?

A room full of human hair. Some of it woven into fabric.

A room full of tallitot.

A room full of eyeglasses.

A room full of shaving brushes.

A room full of shoes.

A room full of suitcases, most with identifying names and addresses.

A room full of pots.

"If a bird's nest happens to be before you...on any tree, ...you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall surely send the mother away...."

A room full of tiny shoes, oh G-d, bears witness to the 1.5 million children, separated from their mothers, whose lives were taken from them.

Innocents. Innocence. My thoughts drifted to my beautiful grandson, whom I silently vowed to hug more tightly when I got home.

What could they possibly have done, oh G-d, to deserve to die so young?

We came to the crematorium. Entering the gas chamber, I could see the scratch marks on the walls.....

Once more we looked into the throats of the ovens which consumed so many bodies.

And once more, we walked back out into the brilliant sunshine.

Leaving Auschwitz, we came to Birkenau, and entered by walking along the same train tracks which brought so many thousands to this awful place.

We stood at the spot of the selections. I wondered what my fate would have been if I had stood here 70 years ago.

We walked the entire length of the tracks, for that is how long each train was as it entered the camp.

“Of every tree of the garden you may surely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat; for on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die.”

“...and the woman... took of its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband...and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized they were naked.”

Surely, the other trees of the garden must have silently pleaded with Eve and Adam not to eat the fruit—to be content with their lives as they were.

Then, as now, we did not have the ability to hear or heed the warnings of the trees.

We wanted more, oh G-d; we wanted to be like You.

We saw the remains of two more crematoria—the steps where as many as 500 descended at once—the room where they were made to undress—the gas chamber—and the ovens.

And all in the shadows of magnificent, majestic, trees. How is it possible, oh

G-d, that they could thrive in this place?



In Gan Eden, You gave Adam a name, and he in turn named his wife,
and all of the animals.

In Auschwitz-Birkenau, we were stripped of our names and our identities,
known only by the numbers burned into our arms.

In Gan Eden, You clothed us when we were naked.

In Auschwitz-Birkenau, You abandoned us when we were naked.

In Gan Eden, we wanted to know the difference between good and evil.

In Auschwitz-Birkenau, we witnessed pure evil.

As we drove back to our hotel in a storm of thunder and lightning, the traffic suddenly came to a very slow crawl. We inched along for a very long time until we finally came upon the source of the problem:

A very large tree had been struck by lightning. Its trunk snapped, it now lay across the road.

It was there to remind us that each of our souls had somehow been broken that day. Just as the traffic moved at a painfully slow pace, each of us would have to slowly, painfully move through the process of absorbing all that we had seen.

The Cemetery in Lodz-----

.....another memorial; this one dedicated to the memories of those evacuated from the ghetto.

A smokestack stands guard over a stack of bent, broken and lifeless tree limbs; it tells us the fate of most of the people who once lived here. Broken, dead, cut off from their people, with no one left to say kaddish for them.



All the way on the right side, under the imperfect 6-branched menorah, we noticed a single living branch; with its leaves still intact, it is reaching up towards—what? The sky? You, G-d? Or the ashes of the hundreds of thousands who perished after deportation ?

Treblinka.....

...one of 4 death camps built by the Nazis.

The trees in this place were co-conspirators with the killing machine.

All the buildings which once stood here were destroyed by the Germans in an effort to hide the evidence. We studied a scale model of what the camp once looked like:

There were no inmates' barracks here, save for the sonderkommando who were charged with transporting, burning and disposing of the bodies of their fellow Jews. How many of them, oh G-d, recognized a relative or friend among the dead?

The living quarters for the SS men and their families, located on the opposite side of the camp, even included a petting zoo. How ludicrous that they could care for animals while the stench of burning human flesh constantly filled the air!

The greatest deception was perpetrated by the trees which lined the 2 sides of the Himmel Strasse, leading directly from the trains to the gas chamber. Their leafy boughs obscured the view of what really existed beyond "Heaven Street", as more than 800,000 Jews in 13 months walked down its path to certain death.



"Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat...." So the Lord G-d banished him from the garden of Eden.....

In Gan Eden, oh G-d, you denied us access to the tree of life.

Why, oh-God, did You not deny us access to the tree of death called Treblinka?

As we entered the sight of the camp, it looked like we could have been entering a park anywhere in the world. The beautiful trees which grew there were planted by the Nazis to cover the grounds after they destroyed all of the buildings.



They stand in denial of the truth of what happened here.

Once again we stood at a larger-than-life monument and conducted a memorial service.

And yet.....

.....this time was different.

Here in this field where so much death occurred, 7 living branches—each one a child of survivors of the Shoah—stood together, proudly waving the flag of our beloved Eretz Israel.



Each one had found evidence of their families having been here—in gravestones, in lists of names of victims, and in places and towns where their ancestors once walked.

They were there to show us all that
despite all the plans of Nazis
despite the 6,000,000 lives so senselessly and cruelly taken
despite the trains, the camps, the gas chambers, and the
crematoria,
despite it all,

we, Your chosen ones, continue on, oh G-d,
moving forward in the shadow of their memories.

And what of me, oh, G-d?

What was it compelled me to come to this place of so much sorrow, torture, and death?



I had no relatives to look for in the lists of names.

My distant relatives may have been among those who perpetrated these horrific crimes.

But

I walked into Majdanek

I walked into Auschwitz—Birkenau

I walked into Treblinka

I walked into the gas chambers

And I walked into the crematoria

AND I ENTERED EVERY ONE OF THOSE PLACES

AS A JEW

More importantly.....

I WALKED BACK OUT OF EACH OF THOSE PLACES

AS A JEW

My identity was sealed and cemented in the walls of those
gas chambers.

I am no less a Jew than the millions who died in them.

And, like the trees, I, oh G-d, will bear witness to what I have seen.

But, unlike the trees, oh G-d,

I WILL NOT BE SILENT.

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Margalit Moriel bat Avraham v'Sarah

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