

NOTES FROM THE FRONT LINE

My retreats at Auschwitz 2014 and 2015: Towards becoming free of the past

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Email: isaacpizer@googlemail.com**Abstract**

This “note” describes two retreats that the author undertook at Auschwitz, in Poland, and a process whereby he was able to move towards being free of the past.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sephardic Jews settled in large numbers in the Greek city port of Salonika, following the Spanish Inquisition of the late fifteenth century. Their language was Ladino, a hybrid of Hebrew and Castilian Spanish.

The Sephardic Jewish community of Salonika comprised a population of 56,000 at the beginning of the Second World War. The community was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau by train in the summer of 1943. About a third died on the way. When one of these trains arrived at the camp, the doors were opened to reveal that everyone had died on the journey. Only 2% of the people of this community survived the Holocaust.

Through my grandfather’s ingenuity, my mother, her parents and siblings managed to emigrate to the UK in the early 1930s. Only one of the family members who remained in Salonika survived. This catastrophe deeply affected my mother. As a child this terrible reality was omnipresent for me in both the talk and atmosphere in our home.

During two retreats that I undertook in 2014 and 2015, I sought to allow (as far as I was able to tolerate) direct experience and awareness of the imprints of grief and trauma on my soul from my family’s history in relation to Auschwitz.

My first visit and retreat at Auschwitz, was with a group of fellow students of the Ridhwan School of the “Diamond Approach to Self-realization”. Central to this model is the understanding that “*there is a true and timeless Self, an Essential Self, a Self that is not constructed in early life*” (Almaas, 1988, p. 265). This has been a belief of mine since commencing personal therapy in late 1979 and quite swiftly benefiting from a transformatory experience, and subsequent inner learning in the months which followed. This understanding of the Self as neither being formed nor defined by the past, affirms our potential to be free; and to meet each other as “Thou” (Buber, 1958).

2 | RETREAT MAY 2014

2.1 | I

We stayed at the Centre for Dialogue & Prayer in Oswiecim established to support where we had our early morning and evening sessions.

The first day we toured the museum of Auschwitz 1. The following four mornings we walked to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the extermination camp. There we had the use of a hut which was used by the SS for recreation; a poignant and darkly transcendent twist of fate. The following few lines came to me shortly afterwards:

Sitting in that hut used by the SS for recreation, and sharing from the depths of our souls. Inquiring, meditating, reciting names of murdered people, reciting Kadish, singing, laughing and crying. And seeing a watchtower through the window. This is a metaphor for the journey to freedom which I will hold for the rest of my life.

I experienced deep healing from my contact and companionship with German people on the retreat.

Prior to the start of our first walk to Auschwitz-Birkenau, it was suggested we form groups of three. I introduced myself to a German couple. The woman, Monica, reacted with humble distress, upon my informing her of my background: "Is it ok that we walk with you?" I replied from deep within my soul, "It is perfect" – and so it was.

Later in the SS hut, I shared an exercise of personal inquiry with her husband, Volker, in which we each took 15 minutes to speak directly from our feelings and thoughts, whilst the other was a silent witness. Whilst simultaneously viewing one of the camp watchtowers through a window, I looked at Volker, and sensed the different relationship we would have had in this place 70 years ago. I felt white light explode from my head. Through his writing and a subsequent meeting, I learned that Volker's father was a member of the Waffen SS and worked in concentration camps. In a childhood surrounded by Nazi family and teachers, he had been deeply inculcated with this ideology. I sensed the loneliness and courage of his journey towards spiritual freedom.

In the depth and mutual compassion of our second encounter, I felt our two planetary platelets move towards each other, and touch. As I looked at the sensitive lines of his face, I felt our shared kinship.

I was surprised by my experience in walking to Auschwitz-Birkenau each day: on approaching the campus I felt peace, and a powerful sense of connection. The green of the site touched and soothed my open heart. The reciting of the names of family members murdered there, or on route, was cathartic and healing, and, following a short sleep back at the Centre, I awoke with a beautiful stillness in my soul.

Father Manfred, the priest at the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer, told us during the final evening of our stay: "When you visit you learn that evil is not the last word from Auschwitz, you can sense the spirits want peace". I was moved by this message, confirming that my experience was neither aberrant nor unique.

2.2 | II

On the final morning I walked to the Camp early, the gates opening as I approached. Separating from our small group, alone, in the quiet dewy morning, I found myself bowing with respect, as I walked and explored. Being in solitude in the barracks, sites of the most terrible brutality and suffering, was an especially humbling experience. I kneeled and bowed at a grave stone where ashes were buried, and at Crematorium IV the site of the rebellion of September 1944, which was staged by Sonderkommandos. Sonderkommandos were assigned the task of separating and removing the bodies of people from the gas chambers, and placing them in the ovens. The only survivor of our family left in Salonika was Benico Abastado. He was a Sonderkommando.

3 | RETREAT MAY 2015

Following my first retreat and visit to Auschwitz, I had monthly Skype meetings with Dorle. She was the instigator and a key organizer of that event. She is a German woman in her early sixties, who has lived in Holland since her late teens. Dorle is a therapist, trainer and teacher of mindfulness. I felt a deep need to return to Auschwitz, and when I spoke of this with Dorle, she said she would come too. Dorle and I, with our contrasting histories share much in common, including a propensity towards the experiencing of anxiety and shame. I think of how it is often found in family constellation work that the souls of perpetrators and victims lay together. Whilst there is no evidence or information of Dorle's family being involved in the Holocaust, she has carried a heavy burden of a transgenerational, collective shame

and guilt. As a child and young woman, she was deeply disturbed by the post-war atmosphere of her mother country; the hiding from and refusal to speak of awful truths. It was this which compelled her to move to Holland. My attitude during the approaching months to the retreat with Dorle was of heartfelt anticipation and a sense of deep connection. This contrasted with the volcanic grief and tension I experienced prior to the retreat of 2014.

However, I still had a sense of a powerful, unconscious entanglement with the fate of family members who were lost in the Holocaust, from which most of the time I semi-consciously discounted and avoided. Through working with the trauma, I was aware of its hold on very young parts of my psyche.

My meeting with Dorle at Katowice airport for our shared journey and exploration at Auschwitz, was for me transcendently significant. With the backdrop of history, it felt like a miracle. Over the year of our meeting and inquiring together, I had come to appreciate Dorle's love and spiritual optimism. My journey back to Auschwitz with Dorle, was an important movement for my soul. Hearing her experience of disturbance, trauma and loneliness in post-Holocaust Germany, and of her journey away and within, I felt close to her; through both the similarities and differences in our stories.

We again stayed in Oswiecim at CDIM, the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer. On our arrival, we were greeted warmly by Sister Mary O'Sullivan. My contact with her over these few days was grounding and supportive. I believe healing takes through contact: from within, the divine, and with other people. And so, I was moved, when Father Manfred said at dinner during our stay, in tired reflection about the propensity of large single national groups to visit Auschwitz, "We can't do the healing alone". He spoke of how Auschwitz can be used to reinforce nationalistic dogmas, rather than support healing dialogue and love.

On the first of our two visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dorle and I set off after an early breakfast for our walk to the campus. It was important to be there early, because of the large groups, who fracture the quiet, which I find crucial. From our visits in 2014, the route along roads cutting across the peaceful Polish countryside was familiar to me. Walking with Dorle was a spiritual experience in itself. I liked our shared, quietly intense attitude. As we walked together, to, and along the paths of Auschwitz, sometimes, at my suggestion, we held hands.

Arriving at 8 am, there was an incident which reminded me of Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic resonance regarding the holding of memory within the fields of soul (Sheldrake, 1981). The Polish guard on the gate, signalled to me that I couldn't enter the campus with my small rucksack. Dorle asked him about her very much larger shoulder bag, and he told her that was fine! At Dorle's suggestion, we solved my problem by emptying the few items I had in my rucksack into her bag, and left the former in the care of the manager of the site's bookshop.

I wondered aloud whether this had been a light historic reflection of the contrasting status of Jews and Germans at this place. As we entered, I felt the love and significance of Dorle's carrying of my load.

Looking forward into the camp, I saw three people standing in a line on the train track simultaneously taking photographs of its infamous entrance. As in 2014, I felt a stab of dissonance from the use of cameras at this sacred place.

At Crematoria 2 Dorle recited the names of Jews from her area of Berlin who were murdered in the Holocaust; and I laid on the ground and felt healing in my soul. Each time we entered a barracks, I felt compelled to bow and kneel in the dusty doorway. In one of the barracks we sat together at its centre, in the darkness against a wall, and Dorle lit a candle to accompany her continuing recitation of names of Jews from her area of Berlin who had perished in the Holocaust. With this act, Dorle again powerfully expressed her fortitude and love. At my request, we sat and inquired together at Crematoria IV, site of the rebellion of September 1944 with which many Salonikan Jews were involved.

Our inquiries together in the evening at CDIM were deep, and set me up for sleep with a continuity of awareness in the flow of my soul.

I experienced remarkable moments of peace and connection as in 2014, but this time they were more substantially in my body. I felt calmer and at times had a sense of radiant white light, especially around my hands. I also noticed my moving in and out of this experience of presence and awareness, into dissociated, displacing rumination and daydreams.

Whilst being and inquiring with Dorle in the grounds of Auschwitz, I noticed an inner movement which had manifested during the several family constellations in which I worked on this issue, ten and more years earlier: To lay flat on the ground with my ancestors who had perished. In this position, as in the constellation workshops, I felt comfortable and warm. I eventually followed a subsequent movement in my soul; to stir, kneel, bow and return to my feet.

The night prior to my journey to Poland, I had a nightmare involving knives (unfortunately I just logged this and not more content of the dream). During the first evening at CDIM, it occurred to me with some shock that perhaps it related to the fact that Jewish women and men from Salonika were subjected to medical abuse at Auschwitz. Whilst knowing the history, I felt compelled to re-check it via the internet, and in doing so I also found testimony indicating genital medical abuse of Salonikan men. I reflected that from the age of nine, I had experienced pains in my penis, for which comprehensive medical tests revealed no organic cause. These eased and receded as following the psychotherapy which I commenced in 1979. During that first night at CDIM I felt the pains again.

So, on the second day, I felt a need to visit or at least see the barracks where Dr Mengelle conducted his medical abuse. Dorle and I found the group of barracks within which it was located. I was struck by their nondescript appearance, and whilst unable to identify the exact barrack in question (probably my propensity to avoid reasserting itself), I kneeled and bowed in the long grass. Just as we were talking about Father Manfred's sadness that individual national and ethnic groups visit Auschwitz with their isolating narratives, rather than sharing and dialoguing with others, I noticed an attitude which caused me salutary shame.

As we approached a barracks which held children, I experienced disappointment, and an inner dismissal and discounting of its significance to me, merely because the barracks' information stand referred to its housing of Polish, rather than Jewish children. I felt pain in my heart, and needed to speak of it to Dorle. This was deeply humbling, and a blow against my own self-righteousness.

During our final inquiry in the evening prior to our departure from CDIM, Dorle asked me if I would accompany her in visits to concentration camps located in her mother country, Germany. For she sensed a need for the healing of the field of soul at these places, that has taken place at Auschwitz. In response, I felt a dirty darkness, and fear. And, a surge of love in my heart to say: YES!

The next morning we parted at Katowice airport, to meet again on Skype a month later.

On returning home, I noticed for the first few weeks my regression to a level of anxiety I hadn't experienced for a few years. In our first inquiry following the retreat, it was interesting to learn that Dorle had a similar reaction. This again challenged the individualistic attitude of my personality towards experience within such a powerful, collective field.

4 | REFLECTIONS

It was healing and strengthening to have visited, with an adult and mindful orientation, the place where (or on route to) most of my mother's family and community were killed; and to have had deep, loving encounters with members of a race towards whom I grew up holding fear and hatred.

My being with Dorle was profoundly helpful for my process of healing and the dissolving of splits in my soul, of fear, hatred and alienation. Our simple walking and sitting together in quiet, reverential companionship was the heart of the experience. It helped me open to "True Nature" as named by the Diamond Approach, and normally called "God": that word, which was an anathema for the atheist cosmology I was taught by my father.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, I felt and thought deeply about my ancestors. Now in 2016, as I review and edit my original essay about these visits, I am stronger and freer to respectfully reflect upon, and, feel less oppressed, defined or dominated by the shadows of my family's past.

The experiences I have described were crucial for my personal unfoldment. Over the past couple of years it has been a deeply felt relief for me to let go of a loyalty to my parents', and my own, prejudiced political splitting of the world.

This has had a generalized effect upon my experience of myself, my worldview and my practice as a psychotherapist. Whilst appreciating the importance of confronting injustice, I now have reservations about radical politicized psychotherapy, where the focus deflects away from the profound, transformatory potential of being, and instead channels developmentally archaic rage, and vain, wasteful demands of the world. These serve to reinforce socialized, alienated notions of personal deficiency, rather than inspire one to learn and be.

Rather than live within the confines of the definitions of the social world, I believe, psychotherapy should support and inspire people towards self-realization and to fully be: "To be in this world, but not of it".

In therapeutic work, I believe it is important to affirm, appreciate and facilitate the essential self; the personalized manifestation of timeless being. To be free of the past, and blossom. The depth of my experiences at Auschwitz reinforced my dissatisfaction with Gestalt therapy's conception of self as "the contact boundary at work; its activity is forming figures and grounds" (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, p. 235).

In my work as a therapist and supervisor, I employ a revised gestalt conception of self; rather than a secular understanding of self and field, I hold a spiritual and transpersonal conception of self and field. This enables me to be open and available to appreciate and support my clients in their explorations. I agree with this statement from John Rowan (2005): "the transpersonal is a dimension of all therapy, which requires attention if the therapist is to deal with the whole person who is present" (p. 1). My current writing is concerned with the integration into gestalt therapy of the essential, ahistoric self to which Almaas (1988) refers.

The retreats at Auschwitz helped me deepen my reverence for the unique healing and spiritual journey of each of my clients. I am aware that whilst my visits were, profoundly important experiences, they were also a culmination of years of frequently agonizing processing of my early object relations, and entanglements with my family system. Thus, as a therapist, I appreciate both the importance of empathic, nurturing support; and attuned aiding of the client's potential for remarkable, apparently sudden movements of the soul towards psychological and spiritual freedom. I strive to attune to my clients, in the service of what will best serve her or him.

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Isaac Pizer was born in 1957, and grew up in north London, within a secular Jewish family. He entered therapy in 1979, which, within a few months had enabled a life changing, transcendental experience. Prior to his career in psychotherapy, Isaac was a social worker for people with learning disabilities. He has been an accredited and UKCP registered psychotherapist since 2000. He is a supervisor to other therapists, and trainee therapists. His initial training was in gestalt psychotherapy. Isaac subsequently trained in family constellation work and therapies for the treatment of trauma, and is an accredited Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) practitioner. He has a special interest in the transgenerational and transpersonal dimensions of therapy. Isaac lives and works in Derby, UK (website:

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