

# Holocaust from page 1C

Those who qualified were pointed to the right and were doomed to pushing labor and eventual death. The old, the young, most women, the weak, were waved to the left and were doomed to immediate death by gassing, then burning in crematoria or an outdoor pit.

## Father's love

Jacob Offen instructed his youngest son, "Get behind me, and stand on your toes." The SS man pointed past Jacob at Bernard, and signaled "Right" to join the laborers. Offen looked back to see his father motioned to the left, to death. Their eyes met in a last moment of desperation and love and goodbye, and it was over.

When Offen was having his identification number, B-7185, painfully tattooed on his forearm later that day, he asked of another inmate, "Do you know what happened to my father?" "He went up the chimney," was the man's reply.

At least, if it can be of any solace, Offen knows where and likely how his father died. His mother, sister, grandmother and grandfather were abducted by Nazi troops in separate raids of the Krakow ghetto and never seen or heard from again.

## Rabbi's memories

Rabbi Rosenzweig was a teenager in one of the many thriving Jewish communities of Poland when the lightning of World War II struck that country in September of 1939. He fled to Russia and escaped.

This trip is his fourth return to the death camps. Poland, once the home of an estimated 3.3 million closely knit Jews, today houses a number estimated as low as only 4,000 but certainly more than 20,000. Nearly 90 percent of Polish Jews were slaughtered in the Holocaust, and hundreds of their survivors were murdered in Poland when they returned to reclaim their property after the war.

As Offen tells his story at Birkenu, as the camera crew tapes

the gas chamber and crematorium at the main Auschwitz grounds, as the team stares in silent shock at the mountains of shoes and suitcases and Jewish prayer shawls accumulated at the heart of the prison camp called Majdanek, the rabbi paces, his head down, in constant aimless motion.

"It is very difficult," said Rosenzweig. "Very difficult."

Questions concerning the total number of those put to death and imprisoned, the work of both collaborators who helped Nazi persecution and the "righteous" in various countries who aided the hunted, the relative numbers of Poles, Russians, Germans and Gypsies who disappeared in the killing apparatus, the position of the Vatican regarding Jewish oppression, and allegations of inadequate response by the Allied powers to the emergency have served to make the Holocaust a highly sensitive subject.

That the Soviet Union liberated and subsequently controlled Poland and most of the key concentration camps sites, often jangling historical facts to fit political ends, aggravated the problem.

## Crime of history

Additionally, the revolution and heartache the civilized world felt on viewing the gruesome images of the camps when they were liberated in 1944 and 1945 served to allow mankind to turn its face away from what Winston Churchill termed "probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world."

Possibly only now has "Schindler's List" made a direct worldwide confrontation of the Holocaust possible. The movie made successful debuts in both Germany and Poland the very week that Offen once again walked the grounds of Birkenau.

At his Holocaust Memorial Center at Maple and Drake roads in West Bloomfield, the first such center in America, the rabbi has seen the most public response in 10 years of operation.

While the lessons of the Holocaust seem etched in the stone of Majdanek, where a granite memorial that covers a sea of ashes and human bone fragments intones "Let Our Fate Be Your Warning," controversy continues about the actual numbers of the terrible toll.

## Death count changes

The traditional number of estimated Jewish deaths in what is called the "Shoah," or catastrophic destruction, has long been six million. More recent figures, based on delayed Soviet information, indicate the number could be closer to 5.2 million dead. However, some believe that a new counting process currently under way will reveal that up to seven million Jews perished, out of an estimated 8.9 million who lived in Europe in the 1930s.

Rabbi Rosenzweig, his historian colleagues, and Holocaust survivors stress that in considering the enormity of those numbers, it is important not to ascribe the crime merely to Adolf Hitler or to a futuristic aberration of the human soul.

The Holocaust existed as a public function of a sifting government, with tens of thousands of bureaucrats employed in the daily eradication of a race of people. At Auschwitz, functionaries as diverse as doctors, train engineers, poison gas manufacturers, and victim-tabulating accountants helped to make up the far-flung killing machine.

It is certainly true that other nationalities, particularly the Poles, suffered terribly under the Nazis. Patriots, the intelligentsia, priests — they were crushed in the conquered countries. But the Jews alone were targeted as a race, hunted down for mass evacuation and slaughter.

Their millions who died were overwhelmingly apolitical and had no involvement in the war; indeed, the German nationals among them were as gully as those of opposing Poland, or France, or the Soviet Union, and ended up suffering the same fates as Jews of allied Italy, or Greece,

**"We unlearned to laugh, we cannot cry anymore, we do not understand our freedom yet, all this because we are still with our dead comrades. We are not alive. We are dead."**

Dr. Zalman Grinberg

Hungary, Austria, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Belgium, Norway, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Croatia.

## No exit

Many heard the official welcome offered to inmates of Auschwitz by SS commandant Karl Fritzsch: "You have just arrived not to a sanatorium, but to a German concentration camp, from which there is no exit but through the crematorium chimney. If there are among you Jews, they don't have the right to live longer than two weeks; if priests, not longer than four weeks; the rest — three months."

In the words of liberated prisoner Dr. Zalman Grinberg: "We unlearned to laugh, we cannot cry anymore, we do not understand our freedom yet, all this because we are still with our dead comrades. We are not alive. We are dead."

The eloquence of the survivors videotaped for the September Moon project is often overwhelming. West Bloomfield resident George Vine recounts how his father kept assuring his son that the real Germans, the good Germans, would soon come along to renounce the actions of the SS. His father admired the Germans beyond any nationality in Europe. Only Vine survived of his family.

Eva Kor, who, with her twin sister, was used for medical experiments by infamous SS doctor Josef Mengele, speaks to her late mother at the very site at Auschwitz where she last saw her alive.

Abel Bomba, who lost his family at Treblinka, says: "I was ashamed

to tell that I was in a concentration camp. (People thought) you must have done something wrong. The German people were intelligent people, doctors, professors; they wouldn't do something like that."

"Very, very fine people perished here," said Bomba. "People believing in God with all their hearts, and they come to a place like this, and they know that five minutes after they will all be dead, that is the thing that a man has in his mind and in his heart. You live with it, even if you go to a concert or a wedding."

Bomba, the last survivor of Treblinka, was used as a harber by the Nazis, made to cut the hair of Jewish women about to enter the gas chamber. He knew what their fate was, but he could not let on. He could not save the wives, mothers and sisters of some of his closest friends, not even relatives. He had to hand over babies hidden by their mothers outside the chamber. They were immediately murdered.

On finishing his difficult testimony before the September Moon cameras, he sadly surveyed the grounds of Treblinka and simply said, "I will never come back here again."

## Unthinkable scenes

The September Moon team has arranged a rare nighttime videotaping at Auschwitz II. The land retains its ability to inspire black death, particularly as darkness overtakes the sky. Rosenzweig hesitates as he bends under a string of lifted barbed wire to enter the area. He had also flinched earlier the same day, crossing a

massively barbed wire prisoned walkway at Auschwitz main. "Even to this time," he said, "I have trouble walking through it."

Posing questions to Offen from behind the camera, Roz Cooperman asks him to conclude the interview by singing a Yiddish song from his youth in Poland. The simple lyrics tell of a rabbi teaching children the alphabet. As Offen's voice echoes across the once-savage grounds, cameraman Kevin Hewitt moves his focus past Offen and into the imposing face of a bright searchlight over his shoulder. For a moment, past and present merge in stunning irony.

Rosenzweig takes his own small solace from the horrors he has devoted a lifetime to chronicling. The Nazis, by their own testimony, humiliated their victims to dehumanize them. They stripped the Jews, whipped them, shot or tortured them, mocked them.

## Honor exists

"The Nazis desperately tried to dehumanize the Jews," Rosenzweig said. "The amazing thing is that they never succeeded. And they couldn't understand it. In that sense, the Germans were defeated. Even after the war, many victims had the opportunity to kill their guards, but they couldn't do it. They remained human, which they (the Nazis) never were."

The day after his testimony, as the director's office of the Auschwitz main barracks, Offen found his name entered on the Nazi list of prisoners. "Offen, B. Student. Born 4-17-24." His actual birthday is April 17, 1929. The lie that saved his life was connected by the next name on the list, "Offen, J. Shoe Repairman."

Later that afternoon, Bernard is asked to pose with a friend outside the gas chamber. "Get in here," he says. "Have your picture taken with the one who got away."

Tom DeLisle of Clinton Township is a free-lance writer and television producer who accompanied the September Moon team in Poland.

## Evening of readings is presented by women writers

Detroit Women Writers will present "Potpourri: An Evening of Readings" at Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, 7-9 p.m. on Wednesday June 15.

This fourth annual showcase of members' work, which is sponsored by the Friends of the Detroit Library, will feature the following authors who will read selections from their works:

Doris Scharfberg — extensively published travel writer and photographer. An expert on Michigan travel, she is a winner of the Governor's Award and a designated "Ambassador of Michigan Tourism." Scharfberg, who lives in Farmington Hills, will read from her recently reprinted "Long Blue Edge of Summer: A Guide to the Shorelines of Michigan."

Darlene House — principal

writer and consultant for "House of Communications." A past president of the Detroit Professional Chapter of Women in Communications, this award-winning copywriter is also a published poet.

She will read from "Language and Literature," an article published in "The Professional Communicator," January 1994.

Nancy Mitchell — recipient of the 1994 Creative Artist Grant, awarded by The Arts Foundation of Michigan. Mitchell, whose published work includes short stories, poetry, articles and essays, is a resident of Walled Lake.

She will read from her young adult novel: "Beatrice: Of Endings and Beginnings."

Naomi Long Madgett — 1993 winner of the Michigan Artists Award. She is the critically acclaimed author of eight volumes of poetry including "Exits and

Entrances," "Octavia and Other Poems" and "Remembrances of Spring." "Adam of Life: Black Women in Praise of Black Men," is one of more than 100 anthologies which include her poetry.

Elizabeth Chin King — author of four books on Chinese cooking, the latest of which is "The Outrageously Low-Fat Chinese Gourmet." Born in Shanghai, she now lives in Bloomfield Hills and is a local leader and media spokesperson for Human Rights for China.

As well as giving recipes, she

will speak on the culture and origins of the food she prepares.

Margo LaGattuta — poet, writing teacher and host of the radio show, "Art in the Air." LaGattuta will read from "Embracing the Fall," the Rochester resident's fourth collection of poetry.

Admission is free. There's free parking in the library's guarded lot off Putnam. Refreshments will be served.

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