

Standing in the remains of the death camps in Poland

I was outraged. I wanted to burn it all down. I wanted to pray.

by [Jane Charney](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue



Majdanek concentration camp, Poland, in 2019. Photo by Liam Palmer.

I grew up in Russia with a deep sense of pride at being Jewish. My parents would always tell my siblings and me that being Jewish set us apart, and they would detail the illustrious legacy of Jewish intellectuals, journalists, academics, and scientists.

Of course, being Jewish in the Soviet Union did truly set us apart, and not in the best way: systemic, government-sponsored anti-Semitism found its way deep into the hearts of many people, including some of our neighbors and friends.

Throughout my childhood, two subjects remained a mystery to me, though I didn't realize it at the time: Jewish ritual (our family was completely secular) and the Holocaust (no one ever talked about it at home or at school).

I didn't learn about the Holocaust until I was 14, when we read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in my eighth-grade English class in Cincinnati. My family had emigrated to America from Moscow just four months earlier.

Since coming to America, I've read survivors' accounts and other primary sources, as well as fiction and academic works about the Holocaust. I've watched documentaries and fictional films, including Elem Klimov's *Come and See*, the 1985 Russian film that was banned in the Soviet Union.

But nothing could have prepared me for the intensity of traveling to Poland and seeing the infrastructure of the Nazi "final solution" with my own eyes.

My primary emotion while I was at Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Birkenau was outrage. Outrage at the Nazis, outrage at God for allowing such a thing, outrage that parts of the camps are still standing and have not been erased from the face of the earth.

Majdanek has been mostly preserved: row upon row of one-story wooden barracks. Some of them are used as exhibit spaces, some stand as silent witnesses to suffering. The outskirts of Lublin are across the road; a children's playground is just over the fence. When we visited, the gas chambers were closed for repair. What must it be like for a bricklayer or a building restorer to work on repairing the gas chambers?

The Nazis picked Auschwitz because it had been the site of a Polish army base during World War I. The infamous Arbeit Macht Frei ("Work Makes You Free") gate leads to gravel streets between well-preserved three-story brick buildings. As in Majdanek, some of the barracks are used for exhibitions, showing piles of shoes worn by the inmates (Jews, Polish and Czech political prisoners, Soviet POWs, priests, Roma, and others); bales and bales of women's hair shaved off during the "disinfection"; household goods and suitcases (Nazis employed the cynical tale that the deported Jews were being relocated, and each person was allowed to bring 25 pounds of possessions).

At Birkenau, the second of five Auschwitz camps, a few wooden barracks (built by prisoners) remain, and visitors shuffle through them to see the conditions in which prisoners lived. But Birkenau is mostly a field of chimneys left over from the collapsed barracks and other buildings, including the laboratory where Dr. Josef Mengele conducted his gruesome experiments and the crematoria, which the Nazis destroyed as they were fleeing the advancing Soviet army. A reproduction cattle car

stands on the remaining train tracks, illustrating with historical accuracy the kind of cars that brought prisoners to the camp.

Logically, I understood that it is important to bear witness to what's left of the machinery of killing. We must bear witness and act so that such events never happen again. But a larger part of me just felt outrage: Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Birkenau should have been entirely destroyed. I had an overwhelming desire to just burn what was left. With very little work, it seemed, Majdanek and Auschwitz could be up and running in a few weeks.

To try to comprehend the extent of the mass killing machine that the Nazis created is to wrestle with G-d. I have never wanted G-d to exist more than while visiting the camps. I have never wanted to pray more than while visiting the camps. And I have never felt more Jewish—defiantly so—than after visiting the camps.

A particularly poignant moment for me occurred in the łopuchowo Forest, just outside the town of Tykocin in the northeast part of Poland. It is a bucolic setting where pine trees tower overhead. As we moved into the forest, we saw fencing and Israeli flags waving in the breeze. Stone markers honor the spots where Nazi mobile killing units herded and killed the 2,000 Jews of Tykocin, about two-thirds of the town's population.

As at other sites, our group of Christians and Jews honored the memory of those murdered by reading selections from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. We also read some of the names of the people murdered at Tykocin. But I needed more. I needed—viscerally, to the point of physical pain—to recite the words of my people.

A group of Israeli youths who were at the site observed what was happening and were invited to join in reading the names. Our group's leader, a rabbi, called a Jewish leader in Chicago whose grandfather had lived in Tykocin and been murdered in that forest. With the man in Chicago on the line, we recited a poem from the community's Yitzkor (Memory) Book. And then, with the addition of the Israeli Jews to our group, it became apparent that at least ten Jews were present—we had a *minyan*. We were able to say the Kaddish, the mourning prayer.

In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel asks, "Where is G-d?" Even as some of the Jews imprisoned in Auschwitz continued to pray and recite the ancient words, others proclaimed loudly that G-d was absent.

I've struggled with the idea of G-d and with belief in G-d. But I love being in synagogue and singing with the community. Perhaps it's the feeling of community that attracts me more than the chance to talk to G-d.

And yet, when my rabbi recently asked me about what I was looking forward to at the High Holidays, my answer surprised me: I said the experience of prayer, and the actual words of the prayers, the opportunity to connect with G-d.

Visiting the death camps and killing fields has given me a new sense of proximity to the Holocaust, which was never a direct part of my family's story. My grandparents served in the Soviet army, and other relatives were part of the war effort, but none (as far as I know) were victims of Nazi crimes. But I know now that the Shoah is absolutely part of my story. Every person whose name is recorded in the book of names at Yad Vashem and reproduced in the exhibit at Auschwitz is a person whose life was cut short too soon—and every one of those people is my family.

A mentor once told me that every point in my Jewish journey is an authentic one, regardless of my level of observance. Visiting Tykocin, Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Birkenau is another part of that journey. My pride and wonder at the richness of Jewish experience—from the deepest depths to the highest heights—continue, and I feel more committed than ever to living Jewishly. I worry about the rise of anti-Semitism in America and the world: it seems every day we hear about a person wearing a kippah being attacked or an anti-Semitic meme being spread on social media. But I cannot and will not abandon Judaism or my Jewish identity. In the face of fear and hate, I choose, more than ever, to live loudly, proudly, Jewishly.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "At the death camps."