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## *Lilacs at Auschwitz*

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*The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge but the  
ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly.*

—HANNAH ARENDT

### I.

In May 2015 I traveled to Central and Eastern Europe to do research for a book about a Jewish family forced to flee their home in western Poland during the war. Vienna was the first place on my itinerary. But before arriving in the capital city of the once-powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was the flight on Austrian Airlines, operated by the German company Lufthansa.

The seatbelt sign had been turned off, and we were cruising through the upper reaches of the sky when it began, the barely audible recitation of the *Ma'ariv*, or evening prayer, by ten Hasidic Jews. Before boarding the plane and after settling into my seat, I was contemplating the psychic price of going to places where a many-centuries-long season of hatred—for the catastrophe did not simply spring up overnight—had almost annihilated European

Jewry. Anti-Semitism was a controlling idea of my childhood: For more than fifty years, my father worked for Jewish nonprofits dedicated to documenting and eradicating anti-Semitism; his family had fled czarist Russia after the deadly pogroms against Jews became more numerous and proximate. My mother's grandfather sent money to his Jewish relatives in Austria before the war, though I do not know their fate. Before the First World War, my stepmother's family had left parts of Poland their children and grandchildren still have never visited. As a small child, I constantly asked my parents how they would answer if Gestapo or Nazi SS men boarded a plane or entered a store and asked the respective passengers or shoppers if they were Jewish. Would they cling proudly to their identity, or would they disown it to survive? The nature of my quandary, it turned out, would surface in the book I came to write decades later about a family from western Poland.

But now I was in a plane flying to Vienna, my parents long gone, and I was thinking about pivotal moments in history, in particular the 1938 dress-rehearsal pogrom which became known as *Kristallnacht*—an event that proved to the Nazis they could act with impunity, practice avarice, and, basically, carry out the racial-cleansing plan they were contemplating. *What residue does one take in at the site of atrocity?* I wondered. *Is there an antidote?* But my thoughts were urged in another direction by the discreet yet unapologetic Hasidim stationed near the mid-aircraft galley. The men, in black suits and ties and white shirts, their heads covered, were davening—whispering and gently rocking forward and backward in prayer—

*baruch atah Adonai (blessed are you, Hashem),  
Eloheinu melech ha-olam (our Elohim, sovereign of the universe),  
asherbidvaroma-arivaravim (who speaks and brings on evenings),  
b'chochmahpote-achsharim (with wisdom opens the gates of  
dawn) . . .*

—and their murmur made me feel safe. It's not every day that one travels in a conveyance sanctified through prayer. And although I live in the modern world, where atrocities and indignities have occurred in the distant and recent past and contemporaneously during my lifetime (genocide, enslavement, indentured servitude, the violence of bigotry), I had never visited a place where so many Jews had been killed and to which so many Jews, including myself, were now making their way, for one reason or another. I hadn't expected the irony—as terrible as it seems to articulate it—of Germans and Austrians serving kosher meals to Orthodox Jews, but irony belongs to the realm of the unexpected, and to travel is to encounter what you cannot predict.

I also did not expect those unobtrusive, deliberate Hasidim to be praying. And, in fact, I wondered how they could manage—emotionally, psychically, intellectually—a trip back to the lands where their ancestors had been so violently removed for the very beliefs their progeny were now free to express. Such pilgrimages are not a new practice. Even during the Communist era, the very pious traveled to the places where they once thrived, to show their devotion to the religious leaders from Eastern Europe who had redefined Orthodox Jewish practice. I imagine how that must have been before the fall of the Iron Curtain: the interminable bureaucracies of visa applications to travel and be infrequently welcomed and mostly regarded with suspicion and sometimes scorn—as refugees and emigrants often are when attempting a return to a place from which their flight and displacement were forced. I want to imagine too the reverential moments of kindness they surely also experienced on those sojourns, the small and sheltering silences possible in the noisier manifestations of hate.

As the men prayed, their wives remained seated—heads bent to *siddurs* or tending to the small children who were still awake—and though when I was younger such segregation confused and then infuriated me, what I saw that evening was a grace I never

before appreciated. This is not to defend or justify misogynistic or otherwise exclusionary tenets, a thing I abhor in any faith, but rather to say there is usually more than one way to interpret other people's lives and traditions. And at that moment, the lives of others permitted solace; the quiet observance of those men and women provided relief from the much louder *unmindfulness* usually on display in grand strokes in public, and particularly while aboard all forms of shared transportation.

During the war years (and even before the official invasion that initiated World War II), the only communal transport provided by Germans or Austrians directly to Jews was via trains and trucks destined for one of the forty thousand concentration camps located in Nazi-controlled territories. These depositories included slave-labor factories and infrastructure projects and their surrounding barracks and ghettos; concentration, transit, and political-prisoner camps; detention and extermination centers; and all the sub-camps associated with the larger camps. But I am writing about May 2015, seventy years after the liberation of these abominable places. I was astonished because, for relatively banal purposes (traveling abroad with questions and prayers), we the relations of those Jews who perished or survived were united with the relations of those who had been, at best, inoffensive-as-possible citizens of the Reich, and at worst, persecutors, captors, murderers, and their silent-witness supporters. Our collective forebears were positioned—according to varying degrees of choice and birthright—on opposite sides of a historical event. These recent ancestors had also stood on the edges of morality—as either malicious or righteous, which spoke to the kinds of power they did or did not possess: On railway platforms with batons and rifles and dogs, or behind the locked doors of the cattle cars. Naked and on the edge, or uniformed and just beyond the rims of pits dug to receive the murdered. In front of or behind guns. Inside or outside the ghetto walls. In the liminal zones between the death and suffering, which was induced or adminis-

tered. As prisoners or wardens at the gates of Hell. On the threshold of and outside the gas chambers.

## II.

Vienna once claimed the hearts of an impressive lineage of thinkers, and I had come to their city to imagine the not-yet-*Judenrein* streets where they lived. I wanted to walk where the family I was writing about had walked. To visit the cafes they must have frequented, where some of the most learned people of the twentieth century had discussed, debated, and thought. I meandered from Sigmund Freud's former house, now a small museum, to the former Jewish quarter and the Judenplatz with its stark memorial to the Viennese Jews who were deported, all this memory-bearing stone, brick, and mortar wedged into a high-end shopping district. I visited a buried-then-unearthed synagogue, and the standard European Jewish museum one finds in mostly *Judenrein* cities on the Continent, with rooms predictably filled with the devotional apparatus of Jews who had fled or perished. I ate a piece of Sacher torte (a confection invented by a Jewish baker) at the Café Mozart and rode on Vienna's Ferris wheel (operated before the war by a Jewish family), both cafe and amusement park much more polished than the seedier versions depicted in the 1949 film *The Third Man*, whose scenes cast in dramatic shadows suggest a lurking malevolence around each corner whose residue still lingers. I went to Europe's oldest zoo, the Tiergarten Schönbrunn, home to the first elephant born in captivity at the turn of the twentieth century, a prophetic event considering the birth took place in the backyard of the palace where the almost-thousand-year-old Habsburg Empire formally expired after its emperor, Franz Josef, caught a cold while walking the grounds with the king of Bavaria, developed pneumonia, and subsequently died.

I went to all these places without offering prayers or hearing them. Yet these streets were also the streets that had been covered

with the glass and debris, tears and blood, shattered, strewn, and fallen during those dreadful hours of November 9 and 10, 1938, which I had been contemplating ever since this trip began. I drifted from one place, one image to the next, as if in a vast mausoleum of the past, of things, of prayers only the dead can claim as their own. The quieted streets of Vienna appeared in my dreams, in which the whole city was a grand cemetery, but one in which memories, not people, are buried. The many suicides whose biographies disintegrated, whose lives can be imagined only as a measure of despair no one wants to imagine. The beaten, heart-attacked, shot in the back of the head, and, of course, the so many more who were crammed into transports and sent to the camps.

With such thoughts liable to rise, one is grateful for the city's lovely gardens and green spaces. To arrive in Vienna in late spring is to be greeted by lilacs laden with blooms of pink, white, purple, and mauve. Robust with life, they are the floral world's swagger, and thus complementary to the from-the-past, gilded ornamentation of the architecture and the elaborate memorials to the deceased royals and luminaries who came from or spent time in this Austrian capital. The memorials to Goethe, Gutenberg, Beethoven, Strauss, Mozart, Empress Maria Theresa, Emperor Franz Josef, and the rest are now surrounded by McDonald's, Sephora, and all the designer-brand storefronts one can find in almost any "free" city caught in the consumerist embrace of the twenty-first century. Yet in spite of those lilacs like nineteenth-century dandies and the smudge-free-glassed opulence of retail fervor, people's faces did not seem to radiate with parallel joy. Instead, the Viennese on the streets seemed harried, hardened, on their way to this or that destination or errand with a purpose defined by time instead of desire, none of their movement infused with overt elation. There was much smoking and drinking, the latter often starting at lunch. Graffiti, side by side with art, lined the waterside embankments of the canals. Here was a magnificent painting of a whale under a bridge, there some exclamatory tag in

German: beauty side by side with a despairing call—for justice, against immigrants, for self-preservation.

The lilacs in Vienna pulled down the boughs with their weight. Their scent had already saturated the air, and the heady perfume was dissipating. I arrived just as the blossoms peaked, after which the flowers began to lose their potency and vigor. Heavy and full were these flowers, as they surely were in May 1938, when the Nazi racial edicts known as the Nuremberg Laws were implemented in Austria. How sweet the smell; how disorienting it must have been for Jews (and gays/lesbians, Roma, the mentally ill) as they were robbed—of their liberty, professions, property, families, friends, lives (and their correspondent citizenship, livelihoods, legacy, nuclear and extended relationships, and ideas)—one May after the next, not only in Vienna but in all the places that were to come under the tyranny of Nazi occupation.

In spite of the spring and lilacs, I was thinking of November and *Kristallnacht*, wandering through what had once been the city's Jewish quarter. It was difficult to picture how it must have been that night—the burning and acrid odors; the sound of glass shattering, cries, and screams; the look of primal fear coupled with disbelief. Beauty wants to replicate itself, writes the contemporary aesthetic philosopher Elaine Scarry. In each tiny fractal flower of the lilac's blossoms is proof of this assertion. But what about danger, immoral power, and the basest forms of ugliness? If beauty contains the urge to multiply, so does its opposite. And which is deeper, or more firmly rooted in our human culture: beauty or the abominable?

### III.

Kraków was the next stop on my itinerary. During the war, the Jewish population here was decimated by murder and forcible exile. Nevertheless, Kraków is the only major Polish city that was not destroyed by the Nazis, and I wanted to have a sense of a place in Poland as it was *before* the *Shoah*.

The city lies to the northeast of Vienna, and so I traveled backward in botanical time to find the lilacs in Kraków in peak bloom. Yet something about those Polish lilacs seemed more understated, which also describes the charm of Kraków. This is not to say the city is without its own special brand of unattractiveness—bands of drunken youths, of all nationalities, roamed about noisily at night; the former Jewish quarter is now more of a tourist attraction than a thriving neighborhood; only a generation after the fall of Communism, consumerism has its grip here too. But Kraków appealed to me because of the Vistula populated with swans, the giant fingerprint-shaped memorial to the poet Miłosz along the riverbank, the hopping magpies everywhere, the green respite of Planty Park, the wistful sound of the trumpet played from the tower of St. Mary's Basilica, and the flower vendors in the city's grand Market Square. In Kraków you can walk through a city of many centuries with their distinct flavors, from its legendary dragon to its former glory as the country's capital city; to the residual gray of the Iron Curtain to the multinational companies now doing business there; and through the many secrets that will never be known, that real fabric of human history, which unthreads even as it's woven. So many come and gone along these paving stones and winding streets. And if it weren't enough to feel as if one were crossing the boundaries constructed by the past, the weather was fine, bringing all the beauty and absurdity into relief and culminating with a cinematic event on the big screen at the waterfront park: a showing of the Polish film *Ida*, a masterful portrait of a young nun who discovers she was born a Jew and then given by her mother to a convent when the Nazis invaded.

## IV.

The Polish town of Oświęcim —renamed Auschwitz by the German occupiers—is an hour to the west of Kraków, and I felt compelled to go there.

Holocaust tourism is a complicated subject, one I could not have spoken to before visiting Auschwitz, and one that has divided my thoughts and feelings ever since I made the trip to that infamous piece of Hell on Earth. “There are two reasons to go to a place like Auschwitz,” writes Daniel Mendelsohn:

The first is scientific and juridical: one reason to go to Auschwitz is that the entire site is a gigantic piece of evidence, and in this respect seeing the piles of eyeglasses or shoes themselves, as opposed to merely knowing about them or seeing photographs or videos of the piles of eyeglasses or shoes or luggage, is more useful in conveying what happened. The second is sentimental. For the other reason you go to Auschwitz is the reason you go to a cemetery, which is something that Auschwitz also happens to be: to acknowledge the claims of the dead.

Prayer is another reason to visit not only cemeteries but also places such as Auschwitz. I am thinking of prayer as “absolute attention,” which is how Simone Weil describes it. And pray I did, at first through the absolute attention of being quiet and receptive, present to where I was. And at last by reciting the Kaddish, or the Jewish mourner's prayer. It required considerable focus to ignore the man in our tour group who was loudly drunk and the woman who exclaimed, without any sense of irony whatsoever, “I can't believe we have to wait on line,” as we stood under the iconic words *Arbeit Mach Frei* (Work Sets You Free) at the gate, waiting our turn to enter the place that has become one of the most complete—and therefore iconic—examples of Nazi cruelty.

Visitors extended cell phones and cameras above their heads, snapping images of the gate's sign, though it is a replica (complete with the upside-down “B” in the word “*Arbeit*,” the inverted letter a gesture of resistance by the Jewish prisoner tasked with weld-

ing the words). The original sign was stolen in 2009, cut into three pieces, recovered by the police, reassembled, and secured inside the museum. Fitting, I thought, given the nature of memory and how it might be appropriated and disassembled, revised and restored, and relegated to long- or short-term storage, appearing or displayed periodically ever after. The politics of reshaping memory had not yet been formally instituted in Poland—that would come several years later, in 2018, when legislation was passed making it a crime to insinuate Polish complicity (witting or unwitting) with the Nazis.

Memory is a subject to think about at great length these days, especially as it relates to crimes against humanity. For example, it's true that the Polish government (which went into exile after the Germans invaded Poland) did not legislate, build, or manage the concentration and extermination camps administered in its occupied country. It is true that there were Righteous in Poland—this is the designation bestowed on those people who assisted and saved Jews for no personal gain. Equally true is that Poles were subjected to Hitler's vitriolic hate; he intended to eliminate as many as he could. But missing in much of the discourse about Poland's death-camp law (as it is referred to) is the unfortunate fact of anti-Semitic legislation of 1935 and after, passed in Poland *before* the Nazi invasion, subsequent occupation, and mass murder perpetrated on Polish soil. Some years before the war began, education and economic prosperity were being taken away from Jews in Poland after a thousand years of, overall, expanding tolerance. That Poland was decreasingly unsafe for Jews by 1939 might help explain why 90 percent of Jews who lived there died during the *Shoah*. Contrast this with Italy, whose citizens—living under a Fascist government on the same continent—saved 80 percent of the Jews in their country.

We entered the building that houses the first exhibit. A Polish adage “Better to carry than to ask” came to mind as I looked at the cans

of shoe polish, the hair, the spools of thread, the coats and shoes and eyeglasses, the rings and suitcases, all the thousands of *things* worn, cared for, carried, and then taken from the people who died here. People who had no clue of their final destination when they packed their suitcases and who agonized over what to take and what to leave behind. I studied the photographs of inmates, the dates indicating the short season between their arrival and death. I was grateful for our guide, a young Polish woman, who didn't cover up the crimes perpetrated in this place, using the verb “murder” to describe how the wardens here exterminated the prisoners who had perished. I listened to the solemn and reverential tone of her words and watched her expression zigzag between incredulity, fear, and sadness. She carried an important yet grievous weight every day she went to work. I wondered how she managed to stay young, articulate, sane. Even writing this now, four years later, I think of her, if only to summon a moment of beauty floating in the depths of one of humankind's ugliest moments.

The tour brought us to a nondescript brick building, save for the small sign identifying it as Block 10. “Here,” said the guide, “is where Josef Mengele conducted his infamous medical experiments.” She paused, allowing us to ponder this fact; to conjure, despite being unable to truly inhabit such an act of imagination, the kind of suffering that occurred behind these walls and to consider how the Nazi mind-set was able to justify the evil perpetrated here. This is what I was thinking about—Josef Mengele, suffering, evil—when we came upon the lilacs. Their color felt like a secret I couldn't then decipher and was made more electric in this place, which could exist in tones of sepia and gray, and which does in some ways exist thusly because before coming here, the only images of Auschwitz I knew were derived from black-and-white photographs and films.

In those images, one sees shrubs and trees, but few depict any flowering trees or plants. *Who planted those lilacs, and when?* I won-

dered. Were they already here during the war, when the notorious Auschwitz commandant, mass murderer Rudolf Höss, lived here with his family? Were they planted after the war, in memoriam? Did Rudolf Höss's wife, who called their home "paradise," dream of lilacs in Vienna? And by "paradise," did she mean that the once-Polish town of Oświęcim was lovely, with its intense spring greens and low, expansive skies, or was she referring to the two-story gray stucco Villa Höss at Auschwitz, with its view of the prison blocks and a crematorium, a house decorated with stolen furniture and artwork, where the family was cared for by cooks, nannies, gardeners, chauffeurs, seamstresses, haircutters, and maids, many of whom were inmates? A house where her children were once scolded by their father for playing "prisoner" with yellow stars and black triangles pinned to their shirts. Children who later recalled a loving father who took them on Sundays to visit the stables. Children who fondly remembered petting the German shepherds in the kennels (the same dogs used to terrify prisoners). Children who said their father was following orders when he committed his crimes, namely the murder of 1.1 million Jews, twenty thousand Roma, and tens of thousands of Polish citizens. Children who, with their mother, became outlaw refugees and whose father was tried at Nuremberg after the war, found guilty of crimes against humanity, and hung at Auschwitz in 1947.

Next—and one wonders what could possibly be next after a place where that which is beyond malevolent and foul inhabits a seemingly limitless dimension—was Auschwitz II, also called Birkenau, which encompasses almost 90 percent of the 450 acres upon which the camp was built.

"Originally," our guide said as we stood inside one of the women's barracks, "the floors of these buildings were made of dirt." As she paused, a slant of sunlight sliced through the gloom of the women's

barrack, a light so exquisite it hurt because of the bare and empty spaces it illuminated. "When it rained or snowed," she continued, "the floors turned to mud. You can see that the lower bunks"—here she paused to point at the small, dark spaces untouched by the slant of light—"would have been filled with mud, and that only those who could not claim a higher bunk slept there."

For a moment a dark scene unfolded in my mind: A newly arrived prisoner—scared, starving, cold, exhausted—is pushed into this barrack by guards. It doesn't matter where she comes from—there are so many possibilities; the prisoners are sent in from north, south, east, and west. It has rained, causing her feet to sink up to her ankles into the very floor where she stands (how groundless one must feel at such a juncture). Only one space is available, ground level. None of the women welcome her onto an elevated bunk. She begs for their mercy. But mercy is unavailable; the other women also are scared, starving, cold, and exhausted. Most of them are sick; many are dying. They turn from her as she sobs.

Any beauty I might have seen in the slant of light falling into that barrack evaporated, and even a photograph of that light is questionable because it disguises the truth of a place where beauty itself hung onto dear life. The beauty in that slant of light (and the image that remains of it) trick us into recognizing a redemptive presence, suggesting that beauty persists in spite of all that is its opposite. Most of us, I think, want to believe in such persistence despite the lessons of history which say otherwise.

Writing this now, my thoughts turn to the ten heroic female prisoners of Auschwitz who smuggled gunpowder out of the munitions plant where they labored as slaves of the Nazi regime. The women—some of them still teenagers—hid the gunpowder under their

fingernails, in shoe-polish tins sewn inside their clothing, or in kerchiefs stuffed into their bosoms and pockets. The gunpowder was used to destroy Crematorium IV in the uprising at Auschwitz on October 7, 1944. The women were sisters Hana and Estusia Wajcblum, Roza Robota, Ala Gertner, Regina Szafirtztajn, Ruzia Grunapfel Meth, Hadassa Zlotnicka, Marta Bindiger, Genia Fischer, and Inge Frank. Estusia, Regina, Ala, and Roza were apprehended and brutally tortured for months, never betraying their compatriots. They were murdered—by hanging—on January 5, 1945, just thirteen days before Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviets.

Had any of these women slept in the barrack where I had stood? Would any or all of them have shared an upper bunk with a less-fortunate female prisoner when the floor was cold, wet mud? Were they ever blessed in May with a slant of spring light? Did they see lilacs bloom in May at Auschwitz? And what of their beauty, the one on which was pinned hope for the future? Where does beauty go once the physical body that contains it is exterminated, or once no one remembers it anymore?

A photograph of Ala Gertner, taken in a studio in the Będzin ghetto, shows a young woman with large dark eyes, radiant cheeks, and a disarming smile. She wears a felt hat and a blouse with a sharply pointed collar. In another photograph, likely taken at the same time, Ala poses with her friend Sala, a younger woman who survived the war and who managed to smuggle her letters from one camp to the next and then with her to America after the war. The beauty of these two women is stunning, especially given that it was captured during their life in a Nazi-created ghetto. Their intimacy—they are seen in profile, gazing lovingly at one another—is equally mesmerizing. I want my inner eye to hold onto this beauty, hoping it will mitigate in some way the despairing, deep ugliness of a place such as Auschwitz. For the same reason, I cling to the story of their

friendship—including their correspondence and their mutual support, at a time when such grace was in short supply.

But I also know we need to tell (and thus remember) the stories of the suffering that took place, and we must articulate these narratives because, as Mendelsohn reminds us: “To appreciate the preciousness of the lives that were saved, it is necessary to have a thorough appreciation of the horror from which they were so miraculously preserved.” For Auschwitz is also an exercise in forging remembrance out of what many would like to forget, and to visit Auschwitz is to be responsible for certain human memories, even if they do not belong to us.

When we arrived at the Birkenau side of the complex, I was grateful for the mid-May breeze and how it moved the magnificent clouds above the fields where ruins of the crematoria are located. Forensic proof of what happened here, yes; though what remains is now crumbling. As the Nazis retreated from the advancing Soviets in 1945, under orders from SS chief Heinrich Himmler, they oversaw the destruction of as much evidence of their extermination activities at Auschwitz-Birkenau as they could. Those Poles who returned to Oświęcim after the war, desperate for shelter, used materials that remained standing at the camp to build, repair, or heat their own homes. By 1947, the Polish government had taken charge of administering Auschwitz and Birkenau as a museum and a memorial. Until the 1990s, all the directors were former inmates. In 1979 Auschwitz-Birkenau was inscribed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, a distinction reserved mostly to recognize the achievements of human culture and the beauty of the natural world. These facts, these facts . . . where on the continuum of beauty’s truth does one place them? And who has the right to determine the fate of Auschwitz, where hair—designated as the human remains they are—is now being allowed to disintegrate, and where only 10 to 20 percent of Birkenau’s original structures remain, the majority in a state of ruin?



Robert Jan van Pelt, the leading expert on the construction of Auschwitz-Birkenau and a cultural historian, favors the preservation of the main camp with its exhibits and conservation facilities. However, he would rather see Birkenau allowed to memorialize the dead through disintegration. After all, he points out, “it is the ultimate nihilistic place. A million people literally disappeared. Shouldn’t we confront people with the nothingness of the place? Seal it up. Not give people a sense that they can imitate the experience and walk in the steps of the people who were there.”

Though it is not for me to say who has the right to decide how to remember a place such as this, van Pelt’s idea appeals to me, a person who favors form and content being joined. There is an authenticity in nothingness, which can provide a reverential quiet in a world made noisier with each moment. And within the silence born of nothingness, prayers might thrive in greater number, each one its own breath of beauty, uttered by those who behold this particular and terrible parcel of land.

We were given fifteen minutes of free time before making our way back to the bus that would return us to Kraków. Positioned near a fence, I discreetly said *Kaddish*. Afterward, I picked up a tiny stone, for a friend whose relatives had been murdered here, so that he might place it on the headstones of his relations buried so far away in America. Perhaps I should say that I am not a very religious person, but I do believe in honoring the dead. Prayer is a form of contemplation, which clears the psyche. And prayer at that particular moment provided me with momentary solace, not necessarily because I felt attached to a holy presence, but because it was the only way I was able to make my own tiny offering—the poetry of a prayer that recognizes the dead—to those who had suffered and perished. Later, I understood that even if one does not touch the divine, prayer connects to that which is deeply beautiful. By this I

mean it makes a space for serenity, benevolence, poise, receptivity, restoration: all the things that Auschwitz—both as what it was and what it has come to symbolize—cannot offer us.

But still I wonder, as I wondered while articulating the solemn words from the *Kaddish*, which fell as barely audible whispers, my breath absorbed into the cool, spring air, a breath that would drift and eventually settle into the soil of Oświęcim: What does it mean to memorialize the men, women, and children who have died because of a nationalistic urge that rejects anyone deemed to not belong? Can people who have been cast out or cast aside rest in peace as we examine—and thus disturb—the circumstances of their undignified deaths? And, why, why, why can we not stop this human impulse to deeply wound those whom we fear, a lament I wish we were singing loudly as the world plunges again into totalitarianism?