

Irene Suchy

Anyone who wants to go, can go. Journey to Maly Trostinec.

There is no “we” in remembering.
Each one of us is alone.

We were alone, each and every one of us, as we travelled to Maly Trostinec. It was of individual concern to each and every one of us. Almost 10,000 Austrian Jews were brought here to be slaughtered. Far enough not to find our way back, near enough to find our way there with no knowledge of the language or the area.

All Jews together, an orderly togetherness, regional differences aside, is a particular cruelty and gave birth to a particular ill-will. Witnesses from the time remember there being no contact between Jews from Germany, Jews from Austria, and Jews from White Russia already living in the Minsk ghetto. They were all called “Hamburg Jews.” The Jewish Museum in Minsk still has their suitcases.

For the sake of convenience, some transports were no longer brought to the ghetto but instead directly to the place of extermination. The railway tracks went as far as possible - to hasten death, to release from life. Only a few years ago, a fishpond was uncovered in which the gas wagons had been cleaned and washed out with lime that burned the flesh on the washers’ limbs. Cleaned so that the next group of death candidates could climb peacefully in, oblivious to death, unsuspecting, equipped with soap, calmed down with the guarantees given to them when they left Nazi Austria and Germany. The ones who washed the wagons were the next. Before they left, they got guarantees from the Jewish administration and warnings from the government.

Children who did not go with their older brothers in the ‘Kindertransport’ to England were told it would not be so bad. They died with their parents, all together. Panic was avoided by collecting their data together. Now that the Nazi era is behind us, dare anyone say the words “guarantee” or “warning?” Concern has been drowned in Nazi malice, cleansing has been removed from human dignity. To the deportees, “light luggage” actually means they should take only valuables, “removed” actually means driven away. Who can count a group of people, when the purpose of counting is not to notice if someone is missing but to humiliate the ones being counted?

Fifty kilometres away from Minsk you can find unmarked places, covered over with waste disposal sites, discarded and disgracefully overgrown signs of a laborious destruction. No bus driver knows the way. Maly Trostinec is not a tourist spot. Rather a place of shame. A pond, its marsh polluted with litter, a swarm of mosquitos makes you feel like the people driven here felt when they arrived. Partisans and resistance groups could mobilize themselves in the marshes. My two ancestors, in whose memory I made the journey, were in one of the ten transports that left for Maly Trostinec on 15th June 1942. They lived for a whole week before dying – although they spent at the most a few hours in the hot marshland once the agony of the journey was over. The plague of mosquitos was soon over.

For whom did I make the journey? Not for the dead, not for their children and grandchildren. Whenever you feel a need, that need takes a detour, breaking through the limits of familiar memories. Of the mother, who throughout her life knew not where and when her own parents died, to return and give her a posthumous account, to give her a reason for the sorrow she drowned in tears for the premature death of a child.

To find out about the family, not out of any pride over the family tree, but for those who had neither the strength nor the courage to ask questions, to find out, to start looking again at this stage in their lives. To shed light on a voluntary post-war blindness. To straighten out deviations from the truth, to stand up against falsehood, to shed light on the long-lost word, to find the path walked in file and yet, decades later, erased from our history. Many places of extermination from the Nazi era remain unresearched: Opole, Riga, ... Umpteen thousands were until now unworthy of being recorded in history.

Each member of our little group had a biography which s/he followed, helpless from within and without, by hanging a card on a tree with dates of birth and death: Birth – Deportation – Murder. The soil around the tree trunk is dug up, seeds are sown, a cuckoo sings in a major third. The White Russian tour guide promised to let us know whether the seeds had come up when she next brought a group to this place – forget-me-nots, carnations, meadow flowers.

The archives of the Austrian resistance contain plenty, but certainly not all, of the 9,000 names. Of some we know their contributions to society - like Elsa Bienenfeld, the music critic; Alma Johanna König, the poet; Kurt von Redlich, another music critic. The contribution of most of them is their relationship to us: stepmothers, brothers and sisters, grandparents of those who shaped our lives. Those who experienced being transported into hell must have had a foreboding, with the jam jar to calm them down, to try and play down the reality. Many of them did not bother to ask, they were certain of their destiny: every generation takes a different path according to how much certainty it can endure.

From hell, in hell, after hell – thus the surviving ladies from the Minsk ghetto see the phases of their life. Survival was pure chance, a rare bonus in a game of chance, from the eternal hope in the possibility of survival, it cannot have been all that bad, say the ill-wishers. Chances for survival were in short supply, hidden among the bayonets of murder, within the cloud of smoke which hid those fleeing from their would-be murderers, in the walk to a neighbouring village and the return to find everyone and everything had been destroyed, in an undiscovered niche in a mountain of wood and corpses. Whoever did survive did not even notice that he had an eye missing, still less that he was hungry.

The memory of future generations often begins far away. Grief over an abandoned “Jewish” woman from the previous generation bursts forth in the face of an illegitimate child, as the small personal cruelty develops terrible consequences – I could almost call them political dimensions, Nazi politics. On a date that recurs 60 years later at a première performance, in a Mass that sets to music the serene yet hopeless text of a mother who has had to live her whole life with the knowledge of her parents’ expulsion. No honour, no compassion, you could even say deceived. Some did find words, one daughter found these, “If God is omniscient, He’ll understand that I can’t believe in Him. And if God is compassionate, He’ll forgive me.”

Memory is our own experience. We who were not expelled, who cannot call ourselves survivors, tread in the footsteps of our ancestors without having known them. We owe them an unwritten history, like the dying who give courage to the survivors and talk about just being alive instead of living the perfect life. It remains an open question whether this history can be found in Maly Trostinec, where the worthless were buried without a proper burial, where they were put down quietly but found no real resting-place once the gas wagons stood still after 15 minutes of shaking. The path was trodden as far as possible, and offers itself to those who come later. Why did I go? Because a detour is a preparation for the unexpected, because you have to go a bit too far if you want a timely arrival.

It was not a journey into the past: we experienced White Russia, this battered country in which one out of four people failed to survive the political régime of the 20th century. The memorial at Chatyn, where one of the desecrated villages once stood, has a square with four trees, on the site of the fourth of which stands an urn. The history of those expelled from Austria resonates with the history of the annihilated enemies of the people.

The tradition of remembering the Nazi era is a hard one for us, such a memory does not unite us and contributes nothing towards patriotic, pious, elevated feelings. These lives ended not in glory but in insignificance. The history of the worthless should not be written out of the family's history or of our country's history.

Anyone who wants to go, can go.

*Irene Suchy, Musicologist and Editor,
followed in the footsteps of
Betti and Alexander Himmelreich,
grandparents of her late husband,
Otto M Zykan.*

Photo captions:-

1. The wood in Maly Trostinec.
2. Memorial stone for the Austrian victims of Nazi mass murder in Minsk.