The Attraction of Auschwitz

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As long as I can remember, official foreign guests toured Warsaw, Kraków and Oświęcim – as Auschwitz was referred to in those days – and to this day these are the main destinations for foreign tourists in Poland. The conflict that took place in Auschwitz when - after its true liberation – the Jews claimed their rights there, has ended in a compromise by removing the hundreds of patriotic (rather than religious) crosses, but leaving in place the so-called Papal Cross, which of course has become one more attraction. Regular pilgrimages of Jewish youth called Marches of the Living again disquieted the territorialists who being unable to stop them, have joined them following the pragmatic tactic: if you can’t fight them, join them. As a result, white-and-red flags flutter among the white-and-blue ostensibly expressing solidarity, but the real purpose is to show the flag, because the competition goes on. Solidarity was needed, but before. Now it would suffice to ensure that the ‘Living’ are not insulted verbally and - literally - spit upon. Besides, solidarity can be shown in hundreds of other places which living Jews do not revisit anymore as Auschwitz has a thousand other place names. Dobre, the shtetl where my mother came from, has a monument to soldiers who fell in Poland’s battles of 1918-20, and a bust of Marshal Pilsudski in the former marketplace, but not a single reminder of the murdered inhabitants of all the houses around it. There are plenty of such places for everyone who truly wants to express solidarity. Archbishop Życiński understood this when he initiated commemorations in honor of former Jewish inhabitants of the towns in his Lublin diocese.

Rescuers of memory have appeared in other regions of Poland, too, but along with people who try to cash in on it. In February 1992, when I visited newly liberated Poland for the first time, I saw in Kraków posters in both Polish and English: ‘Auschwitz, Auschwitz! Everyday tour Includes Birkenau – reservations not needed.’ Not needed, because in a private enterprise, when one bus is filled, another is brought in. This is not criticism, just stating a fact of life. There are memorial plaques, anniversary commemorations and lectures, but more often joyous festivals of annihilated culture, funny figurines with beards and side locks, pseudo-Jewish dishes and music on a light pseudo-Jewish note. Back in 2005, I attended a Polish artistic event in Barcelona, where a trio (violin, accordion and clarinet) brought all the way from Poland played supposedly Jewish music with no single truly Jewish sound. The first fiddle in all that commercial necrophilia is played by bands of skilled musicians who fly in from all over the world to Poland with their peculiar neo-klezmerish music to outshout the post-Holocaust silence. Klezmerization – the neologism is not mine – expands in ever-wider circles. On one hand, it shallows and vulgarizes the remnants of Jewish – or rather post-Jewish – culture. On the other, it encourages paroding, mocking, ridiculing. A concert entitled ‘My Dream; Shalom, Poland: the Most Beautiful Jewish Songs’ took place in July 2012 in Sopot. The songs were really beautiful, because they were written by Itzik Manger, the marvelous poet of prewar Jewish Warsaw, and by Abraham Sutzkever, the leading Yiddish poet from Vilna, highly valued by Czesław Miłosz. But the singer made disconcertingly mocking faces and gestures marring the songs to make sure that their Jewish beauty does not sink into the Polish souls. Two months earlier, also in Sopot, I
attended a concert under the cute title ‘Szpilmania,’ that consisted of mocking the hit songs by Władysław Szpilman (the hero of Roman Polanski’s film ‘Pianist’) on the 100th anniversary of his birth – a peculiar style for a jubilee indeed. As Szpilman’s songs are not Jewish at all, the subtle subtext of that – mildly speaking – tactlessness could have been only the prewar ideology: We not buy music from a Jew. Sopot is not one of those provincial Polish places where seasonal anti-Jewish satirical shows are the traditional entertainment of not squeamish public. Sopot is the summer capital of Poland and a vibrant artistic center, the July Jewish concert was largely subsidized by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and the ‘Szpilmania’ show was the main artistic part at the opening of the yearly Festival of Theaters of Polish radio and Television.

A classic example of commercialization of the Holocaust was the handling of the Anne Frank’s diary – in print, on stage and on screen – that rendered it more universal, more digestible and more sellable. The manipulations proved very successful and Anne Frank became – as Alvin Rosenfeld pointedly phrased it - ‘the best known child of the twentieth century (her only possible rival might be Shirley Temple).’ This universalistic school was pioneered by Jews themselves with Anne Frank’s own father at the head. Their conscious or unconscious first motive was an attempt at flight from Jewishness after the horror; the second, more conscious, was a desire to endear themselves to non-Jewish public; and the third, the simple desire for artistic-commercial success, a ‘tourist’ attraction of sorts. A measure of success of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. is the number of its visitors comparable with such attractions of the U.S. capital as the Air and Space Museum, the National Gallery and the Natural History Museum. Is that a negative phenomenon? No, because most of the visitors take away some important lessons. Otherwise, the old racist-antisemite would not have come there to shoot at the Museum’s guards (who by the way happened to be Black).

Increasingly more tourists visit Auschwitz, more than any other place in Poland, and I hope this does not change – I mean, there will be no greater horrors to see. These thousands of visitors need transportation, water, sanitary facilities like in any other tourist industry on a mass scale, and one has to put up with that - but not with bending of the artistic truth. The Holocaust has become so attractive that it is being written into literary works where it is absent, such as the ‘Painted Bird’ by Jerzy Kosinski, recognized in America as a ‘Holocaust classic’, or ‘Who is David Weiser’ by Pawel Huelle, just because the main characters of these – truly universal – tales resemble Jews and one cannot exclude that they are children of Holocaust. Such vanishedness and smoke screening – premeditated in Kosinski’s story, but not likely in Huelle’s – do not bode well for what Alvin Rosenfeld calls ‘the future of Holocaust memory’. An even more ominous harbinger is a Dutch performance show entitled ‘KAMP’, where Auschwitz is presented as a mythical catastrophe and an evil that allegedly is hard to believe – without a single mention of the Jews. What is more, after the show in 2010 in Brooklyn, New York, car stickers calling for ‘Free Gaza’ were sold with half of the income designed for ‘freeing Gaza’ and for ‘flotillas against the Siege’. Initially, universalization helped the communist regime to appropriate Auschwitz and to belittle, if not passover the Jewish victims – not it enable turning Auschwitz (i.e. the Holocaust) against the Jews.

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It is impossible to prevent some trivialization of the horror when it is shown on a daily basis to thousands of people, yet – as in the case of U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum – it is worthwhile to pay such price. Unacceptable though is stretching the narrative for commercial purposes. Jon Blair, whose film ‘Anne Frank Remembered’ won an Oscar, points out the existence of two schools: according to one, ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’ describes a universal event, while according to the other - a specifically Jewish. In an interview - which I am citing after A. Rosenfeld - Blair proudly stresses that he had chosen the universal school. In America, this school has a majority of enlightened, progressive public opinion, including most of enlightened, progressive, and conciliatory Jews. Opponents of these universalists are called tribalists after the adjective ‘tribal’ that suggests narrow-mindedness or mental blindness. Unfortunately, I am one of those afflicted. Of course, I would prefer to be part of the enlightened majority, but unfortunately I had the bad luck of seeing with my own eyes how very tribal the Holocaust was - tribal like nothing else in the civilized world. It is not good to be a ‘tribalist’ in enlightened and omniscient America. It is better in Poland who saw what I did.

Of course, I would prefer that my family and my town had been annihilated – and that I myself had been a target – for some universal reasons or universal goals, and not merely because we were Jews. But contrary to the clever universalists, I cannot help that events were the way they were. Therefore, I cannot accept the existence of two schools, or two truths. Or to agree touching the past, of which I was a witness, a participant, and a victim. I have not been very successful in persuading presumptuous and arrogant besserwissers who are convinced they know better than I what I had seen and experienced; or the quietists who still believe in the outdated after Auschwitz tactics of seeing no evil, hearing no evil, speaking no evil, also known as hiding the head in the sand. But I have the right of veto, which no expert, or parliament, or court can override, as this is not an academic question. I am reiterating this years-long opposition of mine, because the issue is increasingly crucial with the numbers of vendors at Auschwitz on the rise.