

The Lost Transport

Joseph A. Polak

APRIL 1945: about a week before liberation, the command of Bergen-Belsen decided to transfer the entire section of the camp known as the *Sternlager* to Theresienstadt. The *Sternlager* prisoners were ostensibly of some political consequence and, the Nazis reasoned, might prove useful as exchange-barter for German nationals abroad. Three trains were used for this procedure, each headed toward Theresienstadt.

The story of the *Sternlager* transports is as follows. The first train left the Bergen-Belsen rail platform on April 6, 1945, with 400 inmates of the *Sternlager* and some 2,100 other prisoners. On April 13, at the town of Farsleben (near Magdeburg), it was liberated by the Americans. The second train, made up largely of Hungarian Jews, left for Theresienstadt on April 7, and actually reached its destination. On April 9, approximately 2,500 remaining members of the *Sternlager* boarded yet a third train, and this train, as far as anyone in the outside world knew, dropped off the face of the earth and became known to historians as the “Lost Transport.”

Only later was it learned that the third train had traveled farther and farther east, searching furtively for rail corridors south to Prague and Theresienstadt that had not been bombed out or occupied by Allied forces. Even after Bergen-Belsen was liberated on April 15, the train remained firmly in Nazi hands—a microcosm of the Holocaust which had already ended, at least by some definitions, in most of Europe. While the British were setting up camp in Bergen-Belsen and attempting to feed and heal its wretched survivors, the train, with its conscientious SS command, hurtled doggedly eastward. With raging typhus, hunger, thirst, and the mounting death toll, the conditions on board were beyond description. The Allies added injury to insult by strafing the train, especially during its frequent stops.

On April 23, the train reached its final destination in a delicate forest deep in eastern Germany, outside the village of Troebitz, where it was liberated, in another ironic twist of history, by a Cossack division of Marshal Zhukov’s army. By the

time all the dead had been buried, fewer than 2,000 survivors remained to attempt to put their lives back together in this picturesque village-on-a-lake of 700 people where no Jew had ever lived, and many of whose inhabitants had either fled the Russians or were now evacuated by them to provide housing for the *Sternlager* survivors.

Until July 1945 (by which time almost all had left), the three principal activities that filled the survivors’ lives were finding food, recuperating, and burying the endless victims of typhus. These included some nineteen of the town’s own burghers and its mayor, who had contracted the dreaded disease from their visitors. Yet among those alive today, testimonies about those months in Troebitz are surrounded by a peculiar haze. While survivors recall people and events in the *Sternlager* with great precision, memories about the summer of healing in Troebitz remain almost entirely without texture.

My mother, father, and I (not yet three years old) were on this Lost Transport, and 50 years later, at the very end of April 1995, I was invited by a recently formed group, the “Lost Transport Victims Memorial Society,” to join a journey of remembrance starting in Amsterdam, pausing in Bergen-Belsen, and winding its way to Troebitz where a memorial wall bearing the names of the victims would be unveiled. I was also asked to address the group when it arrived in Bergen-Belsen. In what follows, the material in italics consists of somewhat amended excerpts from that talk.

WITH the Jewish memorial in Bergen-Belsen at my back, the sun in my eyes, and a sharp wind blowing my manuscript around, I recite my words. Four busloads of Troebitz survivors and their families gaze unsmilingly at me. Nearby lie the mass graves of Bergen-Belsen in unbearably neat mounds, with legends reading, typically, “Here rest 5,000 dead.” I feel an enormous fatigue. It seems to me that evil wants to rest, and I am somehow disturbing it.

We survivors are getting old, and as the end of our days draws near, we find that instead of receding into time, the Holocaust, notwithstanding that it occurred over 50 years ago, seems to draw nearer.

JOSEPH A. POLAK, here making his first appearance in COMMENTARY, is rabbi and director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel House at Boston University.

As we move closer to the destiny we ourselves were then spared, as we prepare to join our relatives and friends in the darkness of that Night and in the light of that darkness, the Holocaust, instead of fading, seems to beckon us. It haunts the fullness of our hearts when we sit in our dwellings, when we walk along our way, when we lie down, and when we rise up.

It sits not in the center of our perception, but at the periphery. Like the angel of death, it lurks. Whether our eyes are open or whether they are closed, the Holocaust waits for a momentary distraction, and then it appears. Not far from the daily work of our hands, not far from the play-noise of our children and grandchildren, sits the delirium, sits the typhus; not far, the hunger; not far, the trains.

No danger, then, of the Holocaust being forgotten. Memory, these days, at least for us, is not at risk. It is omnipresent. Sometimes it even feels as though it would take over experience. Sometimes we have to fight to continue living in Amsterdam and Boston and Jerusalem instead of in Westerbork, Bergen-Belsen, and Troebitz.

And so, even as the Holocaust has begun to revisit us, he have decided to come here and revisit it.

On the last day of our journey, an American survivor in her seventies approaches me. "Your speech bore right into my heart," she says. "Do you want to know how I spend my Sundays in America? Not with my family, which is big, appreciative, and loving. No—I go to the Holocaust memorial in our town, which is indoors, and sit near the names and the memorabilia. There, somehow, I am in my element; there, believe it or not, is where I feel most at home."

We are here, then, not just to remember the dead, whom we remember every day. We are here to remember the living. We are here to remember ourselves: to remember who we were in those days, and what it was we went through.

Where the memorials and mass graves are is not where the *Sternlager* was, I was told. The place that today is Bergen-Belsen throws memory into disarray. Bergen-Belsen the concentration camp was burned to a crisp by the British to prevent further spread of the typhus from which my father later died, and to show that an era of evil was over. But how wrong they were! Their flame-throwers destroyed any visual clues to jog our memories.

TO VISITORS the mass graves bring wells of tears, but survivors, who know what happened, who were part of the horror yet have trouble distinguishing between history and nightmare—such survivors are not helped by these harrowing mounds, or by the photographs in the Bergen-Belsen documentation center, or by the empty green fields that now form the heart of where the deepest mud and the greatest squalor on earth once reigned. Nor did the Brit-

ish flames end the evil of the Holocaust. For the survivors on this journey, while the Holocaust of history was over, the Holocaust of memory has grown stronger each day.

We are here to testify not merely to the mass murder, but to our own experiences. We are here to see if it all happened the way we remember it, or—for some of us with the amnesias of childhood or the amnesia that comes from too much horror—we are here to see whether it happened the way we were told it happened. And we are more than aware that in reviewing this episode of our lives, we could be changing the way we remember it, and the way we will tell it to our children.

We are here to see whether the biographies we have been telling (and not telling) are true, for we are haunted by the question of—how could they be true?

How is it possible that I, less than three years old in Bergen-Belsen, survived it? Surely I am a fraud, the victim of a liar's tale—a tale about which I remember nothing, yet which I somehow feel doomed to repeat?

Dr. Thomas Rahe is the young, astute, unsentimental German historian whose efforts have gone far to make the documentation center at the present site of Bergen-Belsen a place where, at least with lists of names and numbers, reality and history *can* in fact be checked. He and I find each other walking along the railway platform. "Close to 600 children survived Bergen-Belsen," he points out to me, "due to its better conditions before 1945. Six hundred is more than any other concentration camp. The Bergen-Belsen children will be the last survivors, the last to be able to testify to what the Nazis wrought." He is seeking, he tells me, to make his list of child survivors as complete as possible, and urges me to get others to register with him.

We child survivors change the iconography of the Holocaust. We are not small and gaunt, with dark heads and shadows under our eyes, or blond and overweight like many of the older survivors of Auschwitz I have come to know. Most of my fellow child survivors seem to know no Yiddish. They speak English and Dutch and Hebrew without accents. They are breezy, they have a light touch; the shadows from which they emerge, and to which they often retreat, are for the most part imperceptible.

How could the tales be true? How is it possible to survive the filth, the hunger, and the cold? How is it possible to survive the humiliation? We are here not merely to testify to the reality of one another's experience; we are here to examine our reluctance to testify.

We don't want to testify, because our bodies and souls were not created to witness such scenes, our minds not fashioned to contain them, much less to recall them.

We don't want to testify, because every testimony is in itself a betrayal: if we were all fashioned as equals, why should they have died and we survived? We can

make no sense of how we were selected and not selected; we cannot fathom the explanation, and our inability to explain has led us down a road of guilt; for some, even of shame.

In the end, then, we are here to reflect on why we were given 50 years more than the others, and to consider what we have done with those years.

As the bus moves steadily through the lush German countryside, which is beautiful yet whose beauty evades me, I move to the front, sit down in the tour guide's jumpseat, and tell my Holocaust tale. Soon others follow, and amid weeping and, surprisingly, much laughter, I discover there are survivors younger than I who remember even less, but who provide me with badly needed doses of reality.

Naturally the older ones remember more. One, about five years older than I, recalls the depths of the hunger, of fighting over potato peels, of stealing and foraging without shame. Another, perhaps ten years older, tells of winter problems: "My shoes collapsed, and they were open at the toes and I got frostbite and was afraid of gangrene. Until I learned that an effective way of treating the frostbite was with the warmth of my own urine."

And stories of enormous dignity: on your birthday, everyone in your family would give you his ration of bread. An SS officer took pity on a child whipped for stealing potatoes, and smuggled him fresh bread. Matzot were baked in Bergen-Belsen for Passover 1944. On the train to Troebitz, which kept stopping, and thereby affording new opportunities to bury the dead, an uncle reminded his nephew of the requirement that the traveler's prayer be recited anew each day, and not merely at the beginning of a journey.

But we are not here, in Bergen-Belsen, merely to speak to ourselves and to one another. We are also here in what has surely become the most contaminated, most wretched spot on earth to speak to God.

For the survivor, speaking to God is perhaps more difficult than it is for others. I have seen survivors pray three times a day in their synagogues and not speak to God; I have seen them teach the deepest secrets of the Torah and not speak to God; I have heard them sing songs of the Sabbath and not speak to God. Only when they recite memorial prayers have I seen them speak to God; in the midst of this inventory of names which no sane mind can apprehend, I have seen them address their Maker. One man I knew would recite the prayer "Lord, full of mercy" for the six children he lost at Auschwitz—one prayer at a time, one child at a time, pronouncing each name carefully and slowly until I was certain the Court of Heaven and the Court of Earth could bear it no longer, and I myself wanted to flee his presence and escape from an accusation from which there was no hiding.

Today, in this place, I will try to speak to God. I will speak only on my own behalf, not merely because I represent no one but myself, but also because

there are friends among us who are nonbelievers, and after the Holocaust I have come to feel their ache and to respect their silence.

IN THE charming town of Bergen we are winned and dined by the Minister of Culture for Lower Saxony. He is calm, remarkably sane and clear, and makes a brief speech. Eighty-five percent of all Germans today, he tells us, were five years old or less during the war. The inheritance our parents left us is the moral squalor that was the Holocaust. Each day Germans need to deal with this inheritance. One way they can do it, he continues, is by putting up money for institutions like the documentation center at Bergen-Belsen, where an effort is being made to list every single one of the 120,000 inmates of the camp, so that, in his words, "the names do not ever lapse into anonymity."

To which I reply:

There is nothing you can do that will ever redeem either your parents or yourselves from the moral squalor you describe. No amount of money, no amount of virtue can ever bring light to the darkness your country has created. The deeds of your parents cannot be forgotten, and as long as memory stirs, as long as the word Auschwitz continues to bring a shudder to the human frame, you are doomed to be their representatives, and your hands will be stained with blood that you yourselves may not have spilled. For as long as people remember history, or hear a Jewish story, or see a Jewish child, you are destined both to take responsibility for this darkness and never, ever to be forgiven for it.

(But of course I say no such thing.)

IN BERLIN, we are taken on a bus tour of the city. We begin at the zoo, and our guide, who has clearly not been clued-in to her new charges, opens along the following lines:

"Welcome to Berlin. Two-and-a-half hours is a short time to see all the history of this city, but we will do our best. Most bus tours of Berlin begin right here at the zoo, so perhaps I will tell you something about it, to give you a sense of what the city has gone through. In 1939, before the war, Berlin had not one but two zoos, which boasted more than 10,000 animals. In 1945, only one zoo was left, with barely 90 animals. . . ."

A slow titter runs through our bus. Someone needs to fill her in. This is what I tell her:

In 1933, Berlin boasted 172,000 Jews and at least sixteen synagogues. These Jews, unlike the animals, were asked to leave, and so in 1939 Berlin was down to 83,000 Jews. But most of those were murdered, so that by 1945 there were only 5,000 Jews left, and while you still had a zoo, you didn't have a single synagogue. With all due respect, madam, your remarks make me wonder: whom do Berliners miss more, the elephants or the Jews?

(But of course I say no such thing.)

FINALLY our small armada heads toward Troebitz. Security is tight—there are two police helicopters overhead and our bus, the first in a caravan of four, is preceded by a cruiser with its blue lights flashing and its klaxon blaring. For many, the terrifying, come-and-go sound triggers a memory of the Gestapo, and brings us close to tears.

What will Troebitz be like? Will the villagers be there, or will they hide in their attics and peer out from behind drawn shades? Will Troebitz remember us? Will we remember Troebitz?

The survivors spill out of the buses as if they had not been allowed outdoors for months, and gather, for the first time, for a group photograph. The atmosphere is electric, the mood high. This is an event—indeed, a scene—that is not likely to be repeated; a return of incalculable moral vengeance, of great triumph. See, we the begrimed, the humiliated of the earth, have returned! We lived! We have made something of these all-but-stamped-out lives!

The villagers of Troebitz are present in large numbers: the mayor, a nephew of the one who died of typhus; the storekeepers; the housewives; and most of all, the high-school students. I work with students at home, and I am at once drawn to these. Their faces are exceedingly straight and innocent, though not naive. They look calmly and directly at me; it is clear that they know everything.

Come, they say, come and see our exhibit. In the Town Hall we explore a project composed jointly by the region's high schools: a photographic display, with commentary, of the journey of the Lost Transport, complete with a chilling table-sized model of Bergen-Belsen, photographs of the liberation of a kind which children should not have to see, maps of the railroad routes, and a list of victims buried in Troebitz, including my father.

No Jew had returned to Troebitz for 40 years. In 1985, conscience got hold of one survivor who came to see under what farmland his father's grave might lie. What he found instead was an impeccably kept Jewish cemetery; his father's gravestone was intact, maintained as it had been left in 1945, with the flowers tended as if by a member of the family.

"Two thousand people showed up in our village of 700," the mayor tells us. "We didn't invite them, and they didn't want to be here. But we did what we could." Troebitz had remembered us with dignity, and we, as we weep deep tears at the memorial service in the small Jewish cemetery overlooking the lake, we remember Troebitz.

I begin my prayer with a story.

Master of the Universe, You Who remember all things forgotten, remember the little four-year-old boy

as he stood in that white hospital room in Eindhoven in 1946. In that big white bed lay an unfamiliar woman, claiming to be his mother. But this could not be his mother! When he had last seen his mother seven months ago on a train in Troebitz, she was a bag of bones weighing 50 pounds, crazy with delirium.

Creator of Heaven and Earth, You before Whom there lies only eternity, before Whose glorious throne there is no forgetting, remember, I beg You, that moment in the hospital room, where in the presence of the priests and the nuns, the woman in the bed finally succeeds in persuading this child that she really is his mother. Remember how the mother, resisting tears, asks the child to open the drawer in the white night table next to her bed. The child obeys, and there, among a sea of chocolates and candies, he finds his gifts: the small red prayerbook, the ritual undergarment with its fringes.

Do You hear, O Listener to the prayers of Your People Israel—that it never occurred to her to think that You had abandoned her on that dark Night? Father of Compassion, You Whose eye observes, Whose ear hears, You Who each day enters the inventory of our virtues in a book, know that this was not an isolated case. Those Jews who were religiously observant before the Holocaust for the most part maintained their observance after the Holocaust.

Master of the Universe, in the Night we weep, but in the dawn, do we not sing Your praises?

Lord of Wonders, look upon us— orphaned and widowed, haunted and half-crazed by a Night which refuses to end, are we not back? Are there not more students studying Your Torah now than before the Night? Do not more Jews speak Your Holy Tongue now than before the Night? Are not our young men and women, especially when they don that green uniform of the army of Israel, every bit as prepared to die for their people as was the generation of the Night—who had no choice?

And so, Master of the Universe—You Who reigned before aught was created—we the survivors approach You with the great question of the sages about liberation: why is this Night different from all other Nights? Have we not suffered enough? How long shall we be haunted by the trains and by the typhus? How long will the barking of dogs and the sounds of German bring sweat to our palms? Is not this the darkest Night of all? Have we not suffered enough?

Master of the Universe, forgive me if I call upon all who are buried here, and in Troebitz, and in Auschwitz and Treblinka, and in the other mountains of human ash, to join with those of us gathered here today, to form a rally of protest. You in Whose hand lies the spirit of every living thing: when will the Night finally become the Dawn, the memories be given meaning, the nightmares become dreams? When will the Great Sabbath finally arrive, whereon, as You have promised, the lion shall finally lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them?