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'This Silent Place'

On a visit to Holocaust sites in Eastern Europe, a Washington tour group celebrates Jewish life -- and witnesses the attempt to destroy it.

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Felix Karpman, 78, is waiting to guide us through his town when our bus arrives in Gora Kalwaria.

He leads us to the synagogue in the Polish village and tells us that when he was a young man, the rabbi here was so esteemed that you had to arrive early even for standing room. Boys climbed hat pegs and hung from the pillars to watch. The courtyard outside was often a dark sea of black coats and hats as the rabbi addressed the faithful from the second-floor balcony of his home.

You can almost for a moment see the crowds, hear the murmuring of voices. Then you jolt back to reality: The synagogue is empty, crumbling, smelling of dirt and mildew.

There have been no services in this synagogue since 1940. Karpman has long been the last Jew of Gora Kalwaria.

There are 28 Americans on this tour led by Claire Simmons, a Holocaust scholar and the child of survivors, a Rockville woman born in the ruins of Czechoslovakia in 1946. She's been leading Holocaust tours of Eastern Europe for 15 years. Like three of every four American Jews, most of my fellow travelers have Polish roots. I am one of two Gentiles on the trip.

We will spend eight days in late spring in Poland and the Czech Republic, in beautiful cities, in small towns and in death camps, learning more about what happened here. We come to witness not only what was lost, but to see what remains of a great Jewish civilization built in Europe over seven centuries.

Our group, including college students and retirees, also comes to honor the dead.

In gas chambers with concrete walls still stained a poisonous greenish-blue, the group recites Kaddish -- the Hebrew prayer for the dead. We also pray next to grassy fields that undulate in strange patterns. The dips and depressions are evidence of the uneven decomposition of thousands of bodies dumped into shallow, unmarked graves.

"By being here and acknowledging what happened, we are their markers," Simmons tells us. "We are their tombstones."

In Gora Kalwaria, in eastern Poland, we pray before a tombstone that honors Karpman's family. Beneath the stone lies an anonymous mixture of bones and ashes that Karpman collected from a heap near a crematorium in Treblinka. It's possible, he thinks, that the ashes of some relative may be among what he found in the death camp. It's the best he can do.

Some of us cry along with Karpman as we say the prayer for the dead before his family's monument. But a few minutes later, in the courtyard outside the synagogue, we dance. There is no music. But we form a circle, holding hands and high-stepping a folk dance of ancient Jewish origin. We dance, Simmons says, for the rabbi of Gora Kalwaria.

Old Warsaw

The bleak, gray city of Warsaw changed little during the post-World War II years of Soviet domination. Recently, though, residents have begun long-delayed renovations. As they tear up floor boards and knock down walls, they've been finding letters, diaries and hastily scrawled notes from people who knew they were about to die.

"They had a drive to record their existence, to be known by name, to tell the world what happened," Simmons says.

So many names. Up to 475,000 people at a time were crammed into this ghetto surrounded by a 11 1/2-foot wall and topped with three feet of barbed wire. About 100,000 died of starvation. The rest were sent to Treblinka's gas chambers.

One-third of the population of Warsaw was Jewish when World War II began. By the end of the war, they were nearly all gone.

We walk the path they took at gunpoint: along city sidewalks, past a nursing college that was then a headquarters for the German SS and to a set of train tracks. Here, at the Umschlagplatz, or meeting place, trains of 58 cattle cars each loaded, 100 people to a car. The ride was 2 1/2 hours. It took 1 1/2 hours to kill the prisoners in the first 20 cars. Then the next 20 cars would be unloaded.

A memorial stands at 18 Mila St., headquarters for the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. On April 19, 1943, Jewish fighters armed with a few smuggled weapons fought the German army. By May 16, they were crushed. To celebrate Germany's victory over starving men, a commander blew up Warsaw's finest synagogue.

We light candles at the memorial, and Simmons describes the ghetto's lesser-known "spiritual resistance" -- the Jews' quiet battle to maintain dignity and humanity even as they were being treated as beasts.

Ghetto residents waiting for death organized an orphanage and schools. They staged puppet shows for starving children. Simmons tells our group, "They kept faith with your culture up to the very last moment. They struggled against barbarism to their last breath."

We sing the Israeli national anthem, followed by a long silence. Simmons finally breaks

it by leading a song she says was sung many a night in the ghetto.

I believe in the coming of the Messiah

Even though he tarries

I believe.

Sewer Scavengers

An elderly survivor recently returned to Warsaw with an odd desire: to find the sewage pipe that ran through the ghetto and came above ground in a Jewish cemetery just outside the ghetto walls. After days of searching in the overgrown cemetery, he found the sewage grate sunk in mud and weeds.

Children small enough to fit into the pipe, Simmons explains, would wade through the sewage from the ghetto end to come up at the cemetery, looking for food. The old man had been one of the sewer scavengers, and he wanted to see it one last time.

Staring at the grate, fellow traveler Judy Frank of Potomac imagines herself both as a child going through the sewer for an onion, and as a mother deciding whether or not to send her children.

"I stand here and feel myself grabbing my mother," she says. "I also feel my children and grandchildren grabbing on to me."

The marble stones and even mausoleums in this cemetery are pushed askew by trees and choked by weeds. Thousands of Jewish cemeteries across Eastern Europe are crumbling and being swallowed up by the earth because there is no one left to care for them.

Gates of a Death Camp

A police substation sits next to the Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw, and officers continually circle the building. Visitors must be buzzed through two sets of doors by a civilian guard. The security is needed to prevent anti-Semitic violence in a place with only a handful of Jews.

Perhaps that should not be so surprising: Jews were less than 1 percent of the German population when the Nazis decided to exterminate them.

My fellow travelers hold an impromptu prayer service in this dusty, otherwise empty place. Seeing the remains of Jewish life in Poland reminds me of visiting the ruins of great Mayan civilizations, except there is no mystery about what happened to the people.

From Warsaw, we travel an hour to the ancient town of Kazimierz, one of the most popular travel destinations for Poles. Art students from all over Poland come to sketch the graceful old buildings built centuries ago by prosperous Jews. Jewish artists and writers flourished here beginning in the early 1300s.

We visit a synagogue turned into a movie theater, but mainly stroll streets filled with art galleries and shops.

Soon we're on our way to the city of Lublin. For more than 500 years, Poland was to Jewish civilization what Greece was to Western civilization, and Lublin was the center of Jewish learning for all of Europe.

Numerous synagogues and buildings that housed yeshivas and institutions of secular studies remain but are empty. Only 20 Jews are left in Lublin. Most are elderly, impoverished survivors who eat in soup kitchens.

Majdanek is only a few miles from the city. We enter the gates of the death camp and walk into a shower room with a floor of crisscrossed slates. The shower heads are real. Naked prisoners were ordered to wash, then were sent dripping wet through a door into the low-ceiling, concrete-walled room. Showers were given, Simmons tells us, because poison gas worked better when the victims' bodies were moist.

Cyclone B, the poison of choice, had a shelf life of only three months, so endless stores had to be shipped regularly to Majdanek. When the Germans ran out of Cyclone B, which took 10 minutes to kill, they used carbon oxide. That took 40 minutes.

Gas was dropped from a chute in the ceiling. From a small, airtight booth next to the chamber, an SS man could watch, making sure the work was done before he ordered the doors opened and the bodies removed to make room for the next group.

"Our people were here alone in this silent place," Simmons says. "There was no press. They had no lobbyists. They didn't have a seat at the U.N. They had no prime minister to represent them. No one heard us. Nobody cared."

It smells as if some residue of poison lingers in the air. It feels lodged in my nose even after I walk outside on a fine spring morning.

Giant warehouses in Majdanek are filled with the sorted belongings of prisoners. Although there are tens of thousands of pairs of shoes, some stand out. The tiny pair of Mary Janes. The sexy white high heels. Did the owner suddenly get pulled away from a party, or did she pack the fancy heels, hoping beyond all evidence that she might again have occasion to wear them?

On the bus, Simmons reads from scholarly texts. One quote especially resonates in its description of a death camp: "The ground is cursed. But the heavens are holy because they hold the voices, the shrieks, the prayers of our people."

From Kielce to Krakow

Along the way to Krakow, Poland's most treasured and beautiful city, we stop at two small towns, Kielce and Checiny. About 100 Jews who survived the death camps returned to Kielce in 1946. On July 4 that year, 42 of the 100 survivors were murdered, according to a plaque on a building.

A young child from Kielce had disappeared. A rumor circulated that the Jews must have killed the child so they could drink his blood in a religious ceremony. A mob armed with clubs and knives formed.

The murdered citizens of Kielce were among an estimated 1,000 Jewish survivors of Hitler who were killed in Europe by their neighbors once they returned home.

In the small town of Checiny, once majority-Jewish, we visit a fine old synagogue that is now a recreation center. Above the entrance to the sanctuary is a stone engraved with the Hebrew words: "How wonderful is this place. This is the house of God, and this is the gate to heaven."

The door leads to a sanctuary with a *bema* (pulpit) and pool tables. The marble fixture on the wall that traditionally holds a box for donations to the poor is empty. There are no Jews left in Checiny to either give or receive charity.

We travel on to the beautiful medieval city of Krakow, which the Poles loved so much that they declared it an open city and ceded it to the Germans without a fight. Both the Germans and Russians respected it so much that they brokered a deal to allow the Germany Army a safe retreat once the city was surrounded.

The 70,000 Jews in Krakow made up a fourth of the population in 1939. Today, there are about 100. Even so, the city each summer celebrates Jewish contributions to the culture here with an international festival that includes plays, concerts and exhibitions.

Our primary destination after a quick city tour is a short bus ride away, to a tri-part compound of death: Auschwitz, Birkenau and Monowice-Dwory.

Auschwitz today is a series of well-maintained brick buildings linked by wide, clean pathways. You must go inside the buildings for a hint of what happened here. Floor-to-ceiling glass cases in one building hold thousands of wooden limbs, crutches and wheelchairs taken from prisoners. Another is stacked high with old suitcases, each marked with the owner's name, like tombstones.

Simmons stands crying next to a case filled with hand-knitted infant sweaters, booties, bottles and pacifiers. Every time she comes she wonders if any of the items once belonged to her stepsisters or brother. Simmons's father, from an old and wealthy Czech family, lost in this camp his first wife, infant twins and a 6-year-old daughter.

Outside, something that looks like broken eggshells covers patches of earth. It is human bones ground and spread as fertilizer 60 years ago. Groups from time to time have discussed scraping a layer of soil from the earth at Auschwitz and sending it to Israel for burial. So far, nothing has come of the idea.

Judaism as Cottage Industry

Prague was once aptly described in a poem as "a fairy tale in stone." The city's medieval center includes a 1,100-year-old castle and majestic buildings in Roman, baroque, gothic and art-nouveau styles. One of the finest cities in Europe, it has become one of

the continent's most popular tourist attractions.

Half a dozen synagogues, including one completed in 1270, are among the many buildings and cemeteries in an area called the State Jewish Museum. Jewish treasures displayed here were brought from all over Europe by the Nazis, who wrote of their plans for a "museum of an extinguished race" in Prague.

The museum area, once the old Jewish quarter, is alive with visitors, and services are still held in some of the synagogues. But most of the congregants are tourists. During the winter, the small Jewish community of Prague has trouble attracting the 10 people needed to make a minyan, or required quorum. A young man from Prague I spoke with explained it succinctly: "Winter," he said, "is not the season of the Jews."

Fellow traveler Molly Abramowitz of Silver Spring is still reeling from seeing the death of Jewish life in Poland, but is even more disturbed to see Judaism as a cottage industry. "It's like seeing what you think is a beautiful piece of Wedgwood china," she says, "but turning it over and seeing 'Made in Japan.' "

Poetry Near Prague

How long since last I saw

The sun sink low behind Petrin Hill?

Like a beast I am, imprisoned in a tiny cage

Prague, you fairy tale in stone

How well I remember.

Those words of longing for the city from which he was deported were written by Petr Ginz. From a barrack in Terezin, a concentration camp just northwest of Prague, Ginz also wrote for, edited and published a secret newspaper. He somehow smuggled messages out of the camp. He was also a talented artist: His painting of Earth as envisioned from the moon was carried into space by Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon.

Ginz was also just a boy. From Terezin he was sent to Auschwitz, where in 1944, at the age of 14, he died.

Terezin was a lovely town of 5,000 when it was closed off, its homes turned into dorms for 55,000 Jews. This was a model camp, a showplace. When the International Red Cross visited, shop windows were filled with food and some prisoners were given decent clothes and ordered to stand along the route that representatives took on the way to lunch with Nazi commandants.

We are taken to the same washroom the Red Cross was shown. Had the investigators bothered to turn the faucets, they would have realized the plumbing was fake. Their report concluded that given wartime conditions, life in Terezin was acceptable.

But an indictment of life in Terezin is contained in the poetry and drawings of some of the 15,000 children imprisoned there. One such child, Frantisek Bass, writes of "a sweet little boy" walking in very early spring through a rose garden. The poem concludes: "When the blossoms come to bloom / The little boy will be no more."

The children's drawings -- 6,000 have been preserved at Terezin -- sometimes mix scenes from idyllic pasts with symbols of a horrid present: butterflies and barbed wire, flowers and bare wooden bunks.

The walls of the Terezin museum are also filled with the photographs and biographies of prominent prisoners: Rafael Schachter, chorus master and conductor. Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein and Karel Reiner, composers. Karel Svenk, writer of satirical cabarets and comedies. Hugo Haas, actor. His brother Pavel, composer and conductor.

Nearly all the musicians and writers imprisoned in Terezin later died in Auschwitz, as did all but 137 of the 15,000 children. The display is a poignant reminder not only of personal suffering, but of the loss to humanity. The books never written, the plays never produced, the songs never sung.

At Terezin, prisoners once performed for each other on a makeshift stage that still remains in one of the barracks. One of our group members, 26-year-old Wesley Citron, a bass trombonist with the Albany Symphony, brings his instrument from the tour bus to play an impromptu mini-concert.

He dedicates his music to Petr Ginz, and the other lost children of Terezin.

Next year, Simmons will lead study tours in Eastern Europe in May, June and September. An eight-day tour of Poland and the Czech Republic, including air and ground transportation, hotels and meals, was $2,399 per person this year. Prices for next year's trips will be available by Oct. 1. Details: www.JewishHeritageTours.net.

Cindy Loose will be online to discuss this story Monday at 2 p.m. during the Travel section's regular weekly chat onwww.washingtonpost.com.

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