

GOD WAS IN AUSCHWITZ

GERMAN PRIESTS LOOK FOR ANSWERS TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Over 68 years have passed since Soviet troops liberated the Nazi concentration camp which even today horrifies people by its name alone - Ocwizim or Auschwitz. Built in 1940, it developed into a full-fledged death factory by 1942. The data on Auschwitz deaths differ but the average figure is over a million dead. In 1947, former prisoners established the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau and became its first staffers and guides. UNESCO listed the memorial as a World Heritage Site in 1979.

German priest Manfred Dezelers has been living for over 20 years in Auschwitz at the doorstep of the former "death factory". He welcomes guests in the Dialogue and Prayer Catholic Center and shares knowledge and considerations as the author of a thesis about God and the evil represented by Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp. However he has to listen a lot as visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum are usually inclined to speak out. Close to a million people annually visit the museum. .

What does the Nazi concentration camp reveal? What does it offer for culture and memory - global, national and individual? Manfred Dezelers told our correspondent about it.

How did you, a German, come to Auschwitz?

I went to Auschwitz for a week as a tourist. I got questions there which I try to answer up to now. Then I was a volunteer in Israel. I met those who survived the war and escaped the Nazis in Germany and in Europe and who were inmates of the concentration camp and had their number tattooed on the hand. I realized how deep their wounds were and how important it is to promote reconciliation.

I lived for some time in my native land and studied theology. I became a cleric of a parish near Munich. The community maintained contacts with Poles and travelled to Auschwitz. (The German Confederation of Catholic Priests initiated a dialogue between Germans and victimized peoples, and in 1970 an important political act took place: German Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt before the monument to the fighters of the Warsaw ghetto - ed.) I met a priest from Auschwitz and I still live at his place. I though it is more important to share life and promote mutual trust rather than to speak about reconciliation. I like the Polish saying "hear the voice of the land".

In Auschwitz it is necessary not only to study history but to "read" the message of the victims and, naturally, hear the voice of your own heart. In Auschwitz your heart inevitably asks: "What would you do in such circumstances?"

Does Auschwitz impress all visitors the same way?



Each person compares what he learned here with what his parents and teachers told him and with his belief. Various peoples have different perceptions. For the Germans memory about Auschwitz is memory about guilt. Not personal guilt as few people remained who were direct accomplices in the crime. The guilt means what other peoples think about us as a nation. It is senseless to say I was not personally involved in it. You have to work to promote trust.

Auschwitz for Jews means the collapse of the old world when they lived in Europe. They

encountered manifestations of anti-Semitism but could never imagine the hatred would become overall and deadly. They could never imagine that Hitler would decide to "finally settle the Jewish issue" in Europe and that civilized and cultural Germans would begin to hunt them down and send in railway cars to death camps. Most European Jews were killed. Now Jews live mostly in the United States and Israel

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with fear the tragedy may reoccur. Their reaction to the challenge is the creation of their own state. All Israeli schoolchildren, police and army officers go to Auschwitz. Besides political aspect, there is also a religious one: how did God allow the extermination of Jews? It was worse than slavery in Egypt. One of the answers is that

the State of Israel revived which means God did not forget his people. Another answer is that we cannot comprehend God, but only believe in him. Maybe he was crying...

The Polish vision of Auschwitz is unique. It is mostly related to the major role of the Catholic religion in public conscience of the people. The emergence of Poland as a state is tightly linked to its baptism. In late XVIII century the country disappeared from the map of Europe as it was divided into German, Austrian and Russian parts. Polish culture survived the hard times due to the Church. In 1918 Poland re-emerged and in 1939 was again divided. Hope for restoration of the state was defeated, but not religion. The idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of Motherland, for the preservation of religion, love and family values in the name of God strengthened in Polish Catholics who were sure it will give them their due sooner or later. The belief is still strong in Poland. St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Conventual Franciscan friar who volunteered to die in place of a stranger in Auschwitz, symbolizes such an attitude to life. He personifies the victory of belief and love over evil and hatred.

It is difficult for me to speak about Russian perception of Auschwitz as I am a westerner and until recently had a vague perception of the Soviet Union and Russia, of their understanding of war in general. The Russian display in Auschwitz-Birkenau speaks about the liberation of the camp by Soviet soldiers in the context of liberation of Europe from Nazism. In late January 2013 a new Russian display opened which speaks about Soviet inmates. Poland is so engaged now in criticizing Communism that it practically says nothing about war victims from the Soviet Union and expresses little gratitude to its citizens for liberation. I believe it is painful for Russian war veterans. Poland dislikes the Soviets, although they liberated Auschwitz.

Decades have passed, but hard feelings are still there.

We everywhere touch unhealed wounds related to our identity. We should not rub salt into wounds and ask whether it is painful or not. There

are doctors to heal wounds. However it does not mean that all the rest should sit idle. Relations between peoples affected by Auschwitz are still healing and we would like trust to strengthen where it was undermined.

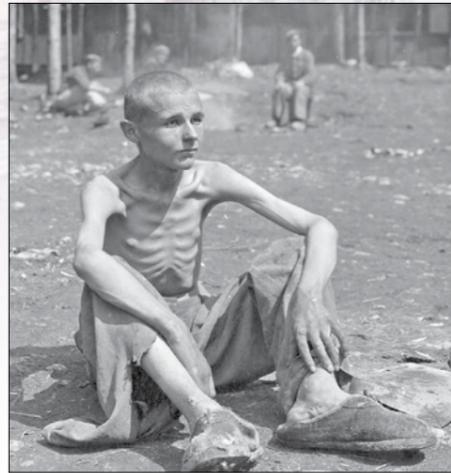
You mentioned how Jews respond to the question about God in Auschwitz. Do Christians have their own interpretation?

There is Cross and the experience of abandonment by God in the center of our religion. Remember the sigh of crucified Jesus: My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? It is key to my hope: God sides with victims even if they do not see or feel him. Christ went to where people most needed him. Therefore, I am convinced that God was in Auschwitz. One Polish inmate scratched a cross on the wall before death. It was a small sign that even in that hell it was possible to find God.

Every person has dignity. It is impossible to see it under a microscope as Nazis tried to do when they studied racial differences. You have to believe in it. In Christian tradition such a belief is rooted in the biblical story about the creation of man after the image and likeness of God. God lives in each of us and loves each of us. The love can be betrayed if you become a criminal. However He would not stop loving and waiting for repentance. Therefore my answer to the question "Where God was in Auschwitz?" is: "In dignity of the victims". He addressed the conscience of criminals through it.

Including merciless Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Hoess?

Yes. I traced what he felt and how he pushed the concern out of his soul. He was not born a monster of cruelty. It was an ordinary Catholic family, but there was no love in the house. The boy was afraid of his strict father and ran away at the age of 15 to become a hero soldier. Then he abandoned the Church and found the essence of life in pseudo-religion of National-Socialism. Since the First World War it was written on the belts of Wehrmacht soldiers: God is with us. When



Himmler was asked whether it should be dropped he replied: "We believe in Providence and are its carriers". The Nazis tried to establish "natural supremacy of the strong race" and "clear" themselves of everything which weakens the people beginning from mentally sick Germans who became the first victims of gas chambers and up to the influence of Judaism and Christianity with their traditions of forgiving sinful people.

By adopting the pseudo-religion Hoess abandoned human attitude to people: SS was allowed to feel only racial supremacy over inmates. Nevertheless, in his memoirs written in prison after the war there are scenes when Hoess looks at inmates like people. He stands on a platform where railway cars arrive with people doomed to death and sees a woman shouting at him and playing kids. The scenes began to reappear in his conscience at meetings with his own wife and children. To get rid of them he walked for long in the neighborhood and rode a horse. Actually, it was existence, not life. He killed his own humanness. God was in Auschwitz - in glances of victims at the camp commandant. He knocked on the heart of Hoess with a mute pang. But the man closed himself. By killing inmates he killed God in himself. This hardness is the nature of evil.

German philosopher Theodor Adorno is believed to have said: "You cannot write poems after Auschwitz". Do you believe there are impossible things after such a horrifying experience?

As for poems... People who survived in the camp wrote verses for memory to acquire a form. Let's take Paul Tselan, for example. If you surround a problem with silence it will once develop into emptiness. Auschwitz cannot be forgotten. The issue is in comprehending out responsibility and its scope. I am deeply convinced we cannot allow Hitler to "win posthumous victory", as philosopher Emil Fackenheim said. He said: if after Auschwitz there is no sense to be a Jew, then the Jewish issue has been finally settled. Those people were doomed but they survived and have to go on. They were denied a place on earth, but now they have a whole state. Nazis wanted to eliminate their religion. It means it

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is specifically important to preserve Judaism. They wanted to bury them in oblivion - we have to remember them. They wanted to kill dignity in people - now they have to be full of it. I believe memory of Auschwitz should not kill belief in good. People should not come back home from a visit to Auschwitz in a suppressed mood with a feeling of evil and hostile world. Former inmates confirm that it would benefit nobody. The meaning of a visit to the memorial is to comprehend your responsibility for a better future world.

There is a display of human hair of inmates in the museum. Sacks with cutoff hair were found after the liberation of the camp. There were many disputes whether to display them or bury. It was finally decided that hair is not a part of the body. The "exhibits" symbolize the attitude to people as material. The Nazis used both the physical force of inmates and their belongings, including golden teeth and even ashes from burnt corpses. When I look at the display of hair I always cry inside me: "You cannot treat people like that!"

Why do you think that despite numerous facts about Nazi atrocities the ideology still finds supporters also in countries that suffered in World War Two?

I believe Nazism is based, inter alia, on a strong human temptation: "I want to conquer the world, possess everything and have nothing in common with other people. If they are in my way I will eliminate them". This temptation - in a reduced form - is known to everyone. It did not disappear with the collapse of the Nazi state. Therefore, it is

very important to have a public system based on respect to dignity of any handicapped person regardless of whether he agrees or disagrees with me. It is easy to do it in theory in the form of a general declaration on human rights. In reality people quickly forget declarations. If mutual respect becomes possible for a narrow circle of people they will be able to bring other people into their space. It is better to ask: "What do I have to do?" Otherwise all the talk about general issues allows each of us to idle.

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