



Life After Auschwitz and Buchenwald: Experiences of a Concentration Camp Survivor

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I come from a Jewish family from Amsterdam. Back in the twenties, we were more interested in the social idealism of the times than in our own Jewish tradition; that tradition had formed the basis for the idealist notion of striving for a just social structure.

After finishing secondary school, I studied medicine until 1942, when I was forbidden to continue due to the anti-Jewish measures of the occupiers. I applied to be a physician's assistant in Amsterdam's Jewish hospital, and worked there until October 1943. At that time, I was recruited into the resistance movement. A part of our group, myself included, was betrayed and arrested towards the end of 1943.

By way of the redistribution camp Westerbork, I ended up in Auschwitz, where I arrived in February 1941 exactly on my 24th birthday. Of the 1,200 people in our transport, 1,000 were gassed to death immediately; 120 men and 60-80 women were allowed to stay alive a little longer. At the time, the average time of survival was three months.

The humiliation and dehumanization were total. Everything was taken away from us, except for a pair of glasses and a belt. Within a few hours, we had been reduced to bald shaven, rag-clad souls identified by number, who from that day on vegetated in a

state of complete abandonment, hopelessness, and wretchedness. Every individual had to fend for himself, without any help or solidarity; our bleak life was full of suffering, disease, hunger, and cold, and was constantly threatened by the gas chamber.

My medical training allowed me to obtain a special position as a doctor. That meant that I was no longer required to spend the whole day laboring outside in the cold of the Polish winter; rather, we had to clean the barracks during the day and check our fellow prisoners for lice in the evenings.

Above the entrance gates, there were sayings like "Ein' Laus Dein Tod" (One louse, your death) and "Arbeit macht frei" (Work brings freedom). Is it possible to imagine anything more cynical? Since every barracks got a bucket or barrel of soup at midday, those few who stayed behind in the barracks had access to a little more nutrition than the other prisoners. Many of those who worked inside saved some of their lunch in order to sell it to the "homecomers" in the evening. There were others, I among them, who warmed up the soup we had put aside and gave it to our freezing friends in the evening. Only now, confronted with my own traditions, have I come to understand that in those moments when a person can be open to the suffering of his neighbor, which goes against his own will for survival, there is a third person present: God. Of course, I wasn't aware of that in Auschwitz. There, people acted intuitively without recognizing their motives.

At the beginning of May 1944, I was

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transported to a work camp in eastern Germany, along with a group of Hungarians who were to be held at the ready because of Adolf Eichmann's negotiations with the British. In April 1945, I was freed, more dead than alive, from the Buchenwald Concentration Camp by the 8th American Army under the leadership of General Patton. I was so weak at the time that I could no longer walk. I remember one particular night: I was lying in bed, consumed with fever. The good American food didn't agree with my drained stomach and my weakened bowels, and only increased my exhaustion. I got the feeling that "if I fall asleep now, I won't wake up tomorrow!" At that moment, I decided that I couldn't allow myself to die. If I did, I wouldn't be able to fulfill my assignment: to bear witness to that which had happened to us.

That night I fought, wide awake, against Death—during that entire long night. Following my return to The Netherlands, it took me five years to recover from the physical effects of that experience. I didn't completely get over the psychological trauma until quite recently. As such, I now feel capable of comprehending and asking myself: How was I able to deal with the loss of my parents, relatives and friends? How can I cope with the annihilation of virtually the entire Jewish community that had surrounded me throughout my childhood?

Another question comes up at the same time: how can one triumph over the constant threat of the gas chamber; how can one cope emotionally with a man-made Hell—the complete dehumanization of Auschwitz, Gross Rosen, and Buchenwald? I must admit that my psychiatric-psychoanalytical experiences were insufficient to deal with all of this, although they did, of course, provide a great deal of support. Initially, there was no time to confront the past. A new existence had to be built up within a world that did not yet provide any support for the psychological effects of being interned in concentration and death camps.

As a practicing neurologist, I mainly treated war victims and war orphans. They expected me to be able to help them better because of my own experiences. The crisis in my life came 30 years after the end of the war. The death of my mother, who was gassed to death in Auschwitz one month following my arrival, occupied my mind. Back then, it was completely impossible to deal with this profound loss. The struggle for life was much too intense, and everything was overwhelming. I needed all of my energy to defy the constant threat of death from the gas chambers, starvation, exposure, disease, and abuse.

During the first few decades after the war, I was primarily occupied with physical recuperation, the continuation of my studies, building up an existence within society, and establishing my own family. The Jewish tradition of ritualized dealing with mourning, which usually is of great help, proved insufficient in that situation: everyone within the small Jewish community was coping with the same problems. The non-Jewish environment didn't possess enough understanding for our situation to be able to provide effective assistance. There were no more relatives. The only one who was truly capable of helping me in this crisis was my wife.

For weeks, day and night, we dealt together with overcoming our fears, pain, and intimidation. After that exhausting fight, I began to gradually "dismantle" my activities as a neurologist. The work with war victims was becoming too difficult for me. In 1976, we moved from Amsterdam to Limbourg, in Holland. There, I was introduced to the work of the Jewish "Leerhuis"—"teaching house"—in Maastricht. The renewed confrontation with my own traditions enriched my existence by an entire new dimension. It gave me the strength to establish new friendships—in Germany as well.

The cooperation of our Maastricht "Leerhuis" with the Episcopal Academy in Aachen and the Lutheran Academy in Arnoldshain enabled me to build a bridge over the abyss left by the war. In this, I was supported by an indestructible optimism I would like to express in concrete terms with the phrase: "Death never has the last word!"

When I assess my life's experiences against the background of Jewish tradition, I arrive at the following structure: The Holocaust put its survivors in an extreme situation, so to speak, which can be compared with the "bondage of Isaac"—he also returned to life following his confrontation with Death, and managed to imbue it with a positive content. The exodus from Egypt and the liberation from destructive slavery provided the motivation for the beginning of humanitarian coexistence among people. The effects of Babylonian exile; of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple by Rome; of the annihilation of the blossoming Rhineland community by the crusaders; of the pogroms, the massive annihilation of Jewish culture and Jewish life were to create and spread oral traditions, and to rein force human values and the sanctity of human life.

Through every catastrophe with which the Jewish community has been confronted in its four thousand year history, these principles have been reinforced and strengthened. The reaction to the Holocaust was the

founding of a democratic Jewish state; but it also led to establishing new contacts with the Christian world in order to attempt to overcome the roots of anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, and discrimination. For example, the term "miracle" in Jewish tradition doesn't refer to the liberation from Egyptian slavery, but rather to the way that a community reacted to that type of catastrophe. The same is true for us. The Jewish community has reacted to the Holocaust by making an unconditional decision in favor of "Life." We don't repress the past; rather, we keep it alive.

Elie Wiesel expresses this somewhat differently in his work. He says, "the voice of the survivors must not die down. Our task is this: to find words for the unspeakable, even if it seems a superhuman assignment. We must not be still. To be still would mean a betrayal of all those who can no longer speak." ❧