

AUSCHWITZ

I did not know my parents were Holocaust Survivors. When I was 13, in school, we started the World War II unit. In 1968, there was no meaningful study of the Holocaust, a word I had never heard and an event of which I knew nothing. On a side panel of our history book was a photograph of Hungarian Jews arriving in Auschwitz. This was the first time I had read or heard the words Holocaust, Auschwitz, or anything about Hungarian Jews. I stared at the photograph and wondered, “My parents are Hungarian Jews. Do they know about this Holocaust thing? Have they ever heard of this Auschwitz place?”

I went home and saw my brother, Peter, who is seven years older, and asked him. His reply was to not bring it up. Now that made me angry. Did he know? Just like everyone in the family, he refused to answer, because we lived in a veil of understood silence. I told him I was not a baby anymore, which made him laugh. As he left for work, his parting shot was to keep my mouth shut.

At dinner that evening, I refused to follow his advice and asked my parents if they had ever heard of this place called Auschwitz. The moment I blurted it out I realized I should have listened to my brother. Both of my parents looked as if they had been sucker-punched, and the guilt of that has never left me, because I was the one who did it. My father demanded to know how I had heard of Auschwitz. I told him it was in my history book. After what seemed like a long silence, he quietly said, “You know you are named after my mother, Piroska. She died in Auschwitz.”

I was stunned as I sat looking at my parents. I couldn't put it into words then, but on some level I realized that the carefree American girl I so much wanted to be was a figment of my imagination, and the darkness and horror that enveloped my parents, that silence they used to try to keep the horror from enveloping me, started racing towards me like a heavy cloud, and I fled the kitchen and them, feeling as if the floor was opening up with me falling into a cauldron of stew that I have been mucking about ever since. It did not bring us closer, it did not open the avenues of communication, and the silence in our home hardened into my full rebellion. I did not want

this history, I wanted to be American, I wanted to be like everyone else, except I wasn't, never could be, and strive as I have throughout my life, never have been.

As the years raced on, I often thought, maybe if I go to Auschwitz I can excise the ghosts, find some sort of peace, but although I have had many opportunities to go there, which is at the heart of my family's annihilation, I could never bring myself to do it. Then this past fall I was invited to be part of the delegation of the March of the Living, and I thought, okay, it's time, I need to do this. My brother was completely against it, reminding me that our family did not fare well in Poland. My family did not want me to go because what will they all do without mom? And with that kick in the pants, I left my husband, my adult kids, my grandkids, and went out into the big world, alone.

My journey started in Hungary, where I connected with my cousins and had a great time. Then I took a bus through the Tatra Mountains and arrived in Krakow, alone. I was feeling bereft, having left a loving family behind, and although acquainted with a few on the trip, not really feeling connected to anyone. However, my lack of feeling connected was quickly dispelled as I was enveloped into the arms of one of the most loving, supportive and fun groups I have ever experienced, walking, touring, eating, and genuinely enjoying being together.

And then finally the day came to go to Auschwitz. It started with a tour of Krakow, of which I wanted no part. I couldn't concentrate or focus, my nerves were completely on edge, and I was anxious and afraid. When we finally got to Auschwitz, I felt as if I was floating. It was hard for me to stay conscious to what was going on around me. I was light-headed and nauseous, wondering if I was going to be able to walk into the camp at all. And then suddenly someone took my hand and told me to breathe, and I grasped that hand and held on. Unbeknownst to me, three in our party were doctors. This man, recognizing my distress, was one of them, Mel, and I will be forever grateful for the care with which he got me through that first day at Auschwitz.

On the second day when we went back, I had that same initial experience, and he again made sure that I was okay. But as we went through the tour, I finally let go of his hand and went on my own, almost marching. When we got to the gas chamber, I took a deep breath and entered, alone, and spoke to my grandmother, Piroška, who was murdered more than a decade before I was born, telling her I was there. I walked through slowly,

deliberately breathing in the dust. And as I exited, I had this surreal feeling that my grandmother, Pirooska, was led in there to her death, and I, her legacy, her granddaughter, named Pirooska in her memory, walked out.

The trip went on, to other concentration camps, to Israel, meeting new family members, and I suffered an injury that brought me home on crutches. The kindness of the group, of the people I met along the way, and of my relatives, has been revelatory. I came home Thursday, and after handing out presents, my youngest daughter, Katey, aged 26, asked to see the photos of the camps. She is an impatient person, who doesn't like to go to the movies because she can't fast forward. So I was surprised when she went through the photos and videos slowly. I had filmed Mel giving testimony at Treblinka of his family's destruction, and to my amazement, she watched all fourteen minutes of it, even going back to make sure she didn't miss anything. Near the end, my eyes filled with tears and she said, "Mom, are you crying?" I choked out a "Yes." And instead of the usual eye roll, she took my hand and we finished watching his testimony together. We sat there quietly afterwards, then she looked at me, said "I love you, mom," kissed me and went home.

I'm not sure how this experience, and especially going to Auschwitz, is going to move me forward. My initial reaction is that it's not something I really want to repeat. Yet when my daughter said she is ready to go there, I took a deep breath and said, "I will go with you." And now I know I can.