

Personal Travelogue of My Experiences in Krakow, Poland

by S. Alfassa - March 29, 2003

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The two words to best describe it was, blistering cold. I had left the warmth of Miami where it was near 80 degrees, to arrive in Krakow where it was near 20. We exited off the plane in the aged little airport in the desolate city of Krakow, Poland. Krakow is the once grand center of Jewish life and learning, a sad place where the entire community was wiped out by the German army in WWII. It's history is well known through the film *Schindler's List* which was filmed there. Not speaking a word of Polish, I first went to the money changer, the "kantor" for they usually speak English, as they are eager to work with American who want to exchange their money. The woman told me it would be about 50 *Zloty*, the Polish currency. *Zloty* comes from the Slavic word meaning *Zloto* or gold. The exchange rate was good, about 400 *Zloty* for each one hundred United States dollars. I went outside the airport to the taxi stand, and told a driver to take me to the hotel Polski. I had a room arranged for me by the *International Committee for Judeo-Spanish at Auschwitz (JEAA)* at the modern Hotel Novotel in Krakow, but because my colleague from the United States was meeting me in Poland, I decided to stay at the same hotel he was so we can go exploring the city together.

The drive to the hotel was a 30 minute adventure on very narrow two lane roads (the staple in Poland). As a helpless passenger, you were better off if you kept your eyes closed for the drive. This was my first time in Poland, or even in Eastern Europe for that matter. I had quickly realized there was more than distance which separated Eastern from Western Europe.

It was March, nearing the end of winter, and everything was still brown. However, for some feeling I got the sense that things were brown around there even in the non-winter months. Burned out dilapidated buildings along with brand new homes dotted the landscape. Just when you think you are seeing a modern cinderblock-built home, you realize the builders are using several narrow tree trunks to hold up the roof as cribbing as the cement dries. Some of the places look like you could have turned the clock back to the communist era of rule, and they would look the same today as they did then. The taxi arrived in the town center of Krakow, dropping me and my bags off between a remnant of the old defensive city wall and my hotel. The hotel was a nice place, three stars I guess, with a door man, and nice wood floors. Just when I thought I was safe in a nice warm hotel, I find police on my floor, right next to my assigned room taking fingerprints from my neighbor's door, with two or three distraught female hotel guests standing around. I have no idea what happened, and couldn't ask if I wanted too. I just went in my room and shut the door. Obligatorily I turned on BBC television to find out what was going on in the war with Iraq, and freshened up.

A good friend and colleague from Atlanta had arranged to meet me in the hotel. He had come to Poland the day prior with the intention of meeting up with me. He had returned to the hotel only minutes after I checked in. After getting changed, we rushed out of the room, taking a taxi to the Jewish "community center" (operated by non-Jews) in the old Jewish quarter of town known as *Kazimierz*. At one point, *Kazimierz* was a city by itself, which was later under Austrian rule joined with Krakow. *Kazimierz* always had a population of Jews, but it wasn't till it merged with

Krakow that the population really grew. I was supposed to be at the Center around 1500, and it was already 1630. We arrived, jumped out of the car and ran in. It was not too late. The International Committee for Judeo-Spanish at Auschwitz (JEAA) still had its panel of vip's assembled, and their speeches were ongoing. We sat quietly in the back, and attention was drawn to us by the host Dr. Michel Azaria who pointed to me and introduced my presence, the crowd unexpectedly applauded, it was nice, but not needed. The lights were then turned down, and an old black and white pre-war film about the once great Jewish community of Krakow was shown. The film was a poignant reminder of a once great community. It showed many pious and happy Jews walking the streets, laughing, talking, shopping. The makers of that film would never have imagined that less than two decades later, every Jew filmed would be deported to a ghetto, then sent for extermination by the Germans.

After the film was complete, the lights came up, and we all went into the lobby of this once grand building which was what they called a former "prayer hall." The facility we were in was called the *Fundacja Judaica, Centrum Kultury Żydowskiej* (The Judaica Foundation, Center for Jewish Culture). It was once known as the *B'nai Enuma House of Prayer*, built in 1880. It was a large three story yellow building with a look and feel of an art gallery. This would be a building I would stop by a few more times during my trip. The director was a distinguished looking bearded man named Dr. Joachim S. Russek. Dr. Russek looked like he could be a Jew, but was not. Born in Poland, this highly educated and well spoken man is in the role of bringing Jewish-oriented cultural events to Krakow. I suspect this is possibly mandated, or subsidized by the government, but I am not sure. I do know there was a large international Jewish undertaking to get this building in the pristine condition it is in, and there is the *Ronald S. Lauder Foundation* which helps operate it. Only around the corner from this Center are burned out buildings, old Jewish homes, which look like they were destroyed yesterday—or in 1943—you couldn't tell the difference.

All the participants, some 50 or so, stood around greeting each other and making small talk. They had a selection of drinks including the ubiquitous Coca-Cola on the tables. It was a nice meet and greet session, I finally met Dr. Michel Azaria who I had been corresponding with on a daily basis for near three years, as well as Rachel Bortnick, a top Ladino expert in the United States, until then, just a "virtual" friend of mine. I also met some survivors from the Shoah, as well as some old acquaintances from New York.

Shabbat was drawing near, and the plan was to get everyone over to the only functional synagogue in Krakow before dark. Peyton and I slipped out of the crowd and started walking over to the place ourselves. We had no time to wait for a bus, when the place was only about four blocks away. The synagogue is called the "RaMaH" (or Remuh) after the famous son of its founder, banker and rabbi Isserles of 1553. The brick/block facility was built in the fifteen hundreds, and sits on a spot where an earlier wooden synagogue had stood. This is the smallest and only active synagogue in Krakow, and the only one with [and I never saw it] a Kosher Sefer Tora. The cemetery which is attached to it has Renaissance era tombstones which were discovered during conservation work. Some stones were said to be deliberately buried to prevent desecration during the Swedish wars (Krakow was captured in 1655 and sacked by the Swedes). As we were walking to the synagogue we saw an ominous placard on a stone wall engraved in Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish and English, it read:

COHENIM BEWARE!!! Only the opposite side of this sidewalk can be used for walking on this street!!! The sidewalk on this side, And part of the roadway have been paved over graves.

After reflecting on the seriousness of this sign and its message, I looked closely at the “stone” wall and realized it was made up of broken pieces of Hebrew etched tombstones. I later learned that this cemetery, desecrated too many times to count, had its stones shattered by many enemies of the Jewish people over its long existence.

The grave of Rabbi Isserles has a wrought iron fence around it today. It is a popular pilgrimage destination for Hassidim who come by the tens of thousands each year from Boro Park, Williamsburg, Canada, Israel and other locations inside Europe. The RaMaH, Rabbi Moshe Isserles was the Ashkenazi commentator on the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law) which was written by the Spanish born Sephardic master, Yossef Caro. The *Shulchan Aruch* (which means “set table”) was written by Caro while living in the Turkish Ottoman Empire, both in Constantinople and Safed. It quickly became the defacto standard on the rule of law for all Jews both Ashkenazi and Sephardic. Even so, the rabbis had communicated with one another often, as Rabbi Isserles did not feel Ashkenazi minhag (customs) were taken into account in Caro’s work. Isserles eventually wrote a supplement called the *Mappah* (the “table cloth”) to go along with Caro’s *Shulchan Aruch*. Today, hundreds of years later, all Ashkenazim and Sephardim follow the *Shulchan Aruch*, however the Ashkenazim also follow the additional supplement/guidance set forth by Rabbi Isserles in his *Mappah*.

We arrived at the synagogue 30 minutes before Shabbat, and I wanted to visit the attached cemetery. I walked in and asked the four gentlemen (just sitting around) if they would unlock the gate to the cemetery for us. Without needing to explain here in any more detail, they would not, were as rude as can be imagined, and were indifferent to the fact I had traveled there from America and wished to pay my respects at the grave of the RaMaH which was only 40 feet away behind their rusted padlock. The words of wisdom (bordering on sarcasm) this bunch of ragtag men gave me was this, “like the store closes at 4pm, so does this cemetery.” I was angry, even insulted by these people who I suspect are not even Jewish. I say this because I found out from a local source that most of the synagogues, nearly all of them (there are six) are operated by non-Jews. One, the “Isaac” synagogue is owned by the Jewish community of Krakow (which seems to be 100% non-observant) and is a for-profit business. I was told by a good source a leading member of the Jewish community gave it to his son to make money, and indeed that is what he does. They charge you to go in, then charge nearly twice the amount to take photos! This once holy facility is a shell of what it was, built by Izaak Jakubowicz in 1638. It was said the German soldiers shot a man in the head there when he refused to light the Sefer Tora on fire. The synagogue was destroyed by fire and vandalism, and is today partially restored. Today it has a short film on the Jews of Krakow, and the embroidered Tora cover is laying on the floor, as are Jewish holy books—this is part of what this secular Jewish community calls an “exhibit.” Note, there is a reform synagogue called the “Temple synagogue.” It is a beautiful late 19th century ornate Jewel of a place. It looks like services were held in it just yesterday. I looked at the kippah wearing old man who showed us around (and took our entrance fee) if he was Jewish, as he seemed to be the Gabbi of the place, but he said he is Catholic.

Eventually people arrived at the RaMaH synagogue, they had services which were conducted by visiting Hassidim and a Sephardi man who was not with our group, then everyone left. Earlier that day I had an old man make a disgusting noise, make eye contact with me, then spit on the ground after I walked by. Was it intentional, a statement, I have no idea? However the temperament of the lovely community was apparent when the next day I observed two young Polish men urinating on the wall made up of Jewish tombstones, and noticed graffiti painted over a Jewish memorial a couple feet away from the synagogue. The Kazimierz district of Krakow, once home to the many pious Jews, is a living museum of anti-Jewish graffiti, public memorials

which have been defaced, apathy, and ignorance. The latter two adjectives being unique problems.

The next morning I was able to get to the cemetery, and pay my respects at the burial place of the RaMah. Later the next night all of the members of the JEAA delegation arrived to tour the synagogue with just a short amount of time. Women the right, men to the left, they packed the 16th century synagogue. When there was no where else to stand and with people flowing in, I directed them to the cemetery which was open. Though very dark, we managed to huddle a group around the grave of the RaMah and there, through the skilled French/English interpreter, my colleague Albert Garih, I was able to instruct the visitors who the man buried here was, and how he had a professional relationship with a very important Judeo-Spanish Sephardic sage.

My colleague Peyton Bass worked for the airlines back in the United States, so he had the opportunity to fly for free, but only standby. That Friday night he had found out he had to quickly depart the next morning after finding out flights were being booked rapidly, and he might miss his plane. Because of this he left early in the morning, leaving me alone at the hotel not knowing anyone, with a perceived sense of emptiness. I know it sounds weird, but having my colleague around had kept the starkness and memory of this ailing city away from me. I went outside, and the bright European sunshine helped keep the biting cold under control. I went for a walk in the park which borders the old part of Krakow. I passed through an arch which was once a medieval thoroughway into the walled city. There was a tremendous amount of dirt, not litter, but dirt on the streets, walls, buildings and vehicles in Poland. I doubt such luxuries as carwashes exist there, and it is quite obvious the window washers are all unemployed. Poland still uses the same electric trolley car it used before the war, and if you want to step back in time, just step onto one.

I made my way down to the former Jewish quarter, and spent a greater part of the day exploring each street. As I walked I looked at each and every door frame, probing for a remnant of either a Jewish architectural motif, or empty hole where a Mezuzah once sat. I found one set of doors which had a deep and prominent hole where the mezuzah once sat. It was eerie to see that. Block after block, I saw many old row homes, but no other trace of Jewishness. I happened upon a market, an old square where locals traded old junk and household goods. I figured somewhere in this flea market of useless items I would possibly find something which might have been stolen or located from a Jewish family some 60 years earlier. The looks that this bearded kippah wearing Jew got were not surprising, especially when I stopped to take a long gaze at the man selling Nazi comic books entitled "Kommander Klause"! I found another man selling a nice looking painting of Adolf Hitler sitting on a horse in a forest. For a moment, I was not sure if I was I in 1943, or 2003. Should this surprise anyone, that members of the poorer class of Polish people are selling Nazi memorabilia in the street where Jews once bought fish they would eat for Shabbat? I haven't mention this yet, but remember the place called the Fundacja Judaica, Centrum Kultury Zydowskiej (The Judaica Foundation, Center for Jewish Culture) where I had first arrived, in the basement there they have an "antique" store which among items they sell are postcards depicting Jewish slaves being tortured, statues of Catholic idols, old Jewish owned suitcases, old typewriters, boxes of old black and white family photos, old Polish printed Jewish holy books, thousands of Nazi era Jewish documents and even a large poster of Hitler raising his hands making the V for Victory sign. According to the decals on the door, the "Jewish" Center accepts both Visa and MasterCard! That night I went back to my hotel, watched some more news on the war, and stared out the window at the old city walls which were built for defense, complete with slits to shoot arrows and leather and iron wrapped doorways.

There was anti-Jewish graffiti everywhere in Krakow. I saw several different groups, including the identifying marks of both skin heads, and white supremacy groups. There were images of a *Magen David* hanging from a gallows painted on buildings, a Magen David with an equal sign then a swastika, a circle with a cross on it, a white supremacist sign, and self proclaimed gangs such as “Krakovia Hools” and others. The graffiti was everywhere, and it almost seemed as if the neo-Nazis were competing to see who can hate the Jews more. The Jewish Center I noticed had no graffiti, but the yellow building had several patches of bright clean yellow paint seemingly covering up words. To my surprise, the Jewish Center had photos of this very graffiti on display in their gallery! They said it documented the anti-Jewish occurrences for the locals. However I didn’t see any locals inside the building visiting a Jewish cultural center. It is hard to believe they actually come, when just outside they are selling Nazi memorabilia, as they are in the very basement of this building! Now that I think about it, I still cannot figure out what is Jewish about this “Jewish Center”? My semi-formal discussion with the director of the Center about the graffiti problem prompted him to say, “there is graffiti in New York and Chicago” to which I answered, “but Jews were not deported, tortured and murdered in New York or Chicago”. He seemed to already have a canned answer for that, not wanting to “go there” in conversation. I am not saying he denied anything, but lets just say he is obviously a highly trained public relations man.

Sunday morning I walked around the main square in Krakow, which is said to be the largest in all of Europe—and indeed it is big. It was a cold day, both in temperature, and in spirit. There were occasional street entertainers setting up, as the merchants opened their umbrellas in the cafes getting ready for the afternoon crowd. Most of the buildings there belonged to the nobility of Poland, Catholic churches and 13th century buildings surround the square. Today it’s a mixed commercial and tourist zone. If the history of this country and specifically this city was not so tragic, I would say it’s historic buildings were actually something beautiful to look at. Krakow escaped destruction towards the end of WWII, for the withdrawing Germans (who had every intention of destroying Krakow like they did Warsaw) were confronted by the Russian Army in January of 1945 which outflanked the Germans, obliging them to flee before they could blow the city up. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Krakow became a leading city in Europe. In 1569 Poland united with Lithuania. Krakow became situated on the periphery of the large country and gradually lost its political importance in favor of the centrally situated Warsaw which is the modern capital. The Jews had originally been invited to settle in Poland by King Kazimierz the Great in the 14th century after they were expelled from Western Europe.

I met up with Dan, a physician from America who was part of the JEAA delegation. Together we walked to the only other cemetery, called the “new” cemetery which was really an *old* heavily crowded cemetery. The cemetery was something you would see in an old Frankenstein movie. Shattered tombstones, some upright, some still on the floor. Trees and tall grasses growing everywhere, leaf litter a decade old and thick, and a dark canopy of trees obscuring most of the sun light from above. The cemetery seemed to have been built about the mid 1800’s. Some tombstones, like many old ones in Poland, were made of sandstone, and are completely worn away because of the weather. Many others were destroyed by the Germans, or by vandalism. There are several walls made up of broken tombstones, and there are several “burial locations” with stones which are for Jewish martyrs who died in the Shoah. The cemetery is quite dilapidated, and is obviously not kept up, however some grave markers indicated people were buried there as late as two years ago. I am glad I got an opportunity to visit this historic but depressing place. Dan, who speaks fluent Hebrew was a tremendous help and inspiration during this visit.

That afternoon was cold, and people used their wood and coal burning stoves and fireplaces all day to keep warm. Even the "Jewish" restaurants in the Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, had smoke rising. A little about these restaurants, all are called "Jewish" non are kosher. None are even Jewish owned. The only thing actually Jewish about them is the word J-e-w-i-s-h. These restaurants are built in what were once three story row homes in a location where very pious Jews lived, across the street from the RaMaH synagogue. By early evening all around you was the flavor of smoke in the air. It was like an old movie, smoke coming out of the chimneys of the rows of homes, gracefully rising in the air. Though it looked pristine, it wasn't. Ash was raining down on occasion, and the air was horrible. I remember seeing from the airplane window a thick layer of haze, tall smokestacks, and a horizon darker than I had seen even in Los Angeles, which is said to have very bad air. When I returned home a quick search on the Internet, in the *CIA fact book*, stated about Poland, "...air pollution nonetheless remains serious because of sulfur dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants."

Late Sunday afternoon I had the doorman call me a taxi, and I relocated to the Hotel Novotel where the other members of the international delegation were staying. The other hotel was across the Vistula river which is a wide flat urban river with concrete banks which divides the city. Krakow fell in 1795 and became part of the Austrian empire. It regained its independence in 1918, only to be occupied by the Germans. Krakow was recognized by the UNESCO as a monument of world culture and is now a place where international cultural events are organized periodically. It became a Soviet satellite country following the war, but one that was comparatively tolerant and progressive. Labor turmoil in 1980 led to the formation of the independent trade union "Solidarity" that over time became a political force and by 1990 had swept elections and the presidency. The side of the river the hotel was on was a point of departure to the death camps after the ghettoization of the Jews of Krakow. After checking in the hotel, I met with some friends and colleagues in the lounge. That was an early night for me, as the next day would be a long and emotional one.

The clock went off at 6:15am, it was Monday March 24, the day we had been waiting for, the day the Sephardic Jews would officially be represented at the international monument at the most notorious death camp in the world, Auschwitz-Birkenau. This day was the culmination of work which started in the spring of 2000. During an international conference on Judeo-Spanish organized in Salonica (Greece) in April of 2000, survivors of the Shoah and their descendants unanimously adopted a proposal by Paris based Professor Haim-Vidal Sephiha (a survivor) that the memory of the Sephardic martyrs be honored by the addition of Judeo-Spanish to the existing multi-lingual memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau. For over three years the International Committee for Judeo-Spanish at Auschwitz gathered written support from members and agencies of the international Jewish community. I was the original United States JEAA representative until I moved to Israel, and Mr. Albert Gariah took over. I had the great honor of getting the first major endorsement, that of the *Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York, Congregation Shearith Israel* which was founded in 1654. At the time, I worked for the educational arm of Congregation Shearith Israel known as *Sephardic House*. As a national board member, and the Director of Research and Development, I was able to bring this very important project to the table, and gained its endorsement quickly.

Originally we had hoped to get 10 or 20 people in attendance. In reality we got near 250 or more, with people participating from the United States, Spain, Israel, Greece, Turkey, France and of course Poland. The French delegation was outstanding. Nearly 150 Jews came from France alone, on the very morning of the event. We were so honored to have such a large delegation of French Sephardim (most who's families were from Turkey and Greece), everyone boarded buses and went to the Krakow airport to warmly receive them. After the French delegation arrived, we

boarded four beautiful tour buses and proceeded on our memorial pilgrimage to the rural industrial city of *Oświęcim* (Auschwitz) one hour away.

We arrived at Auschwitz, unloaded from the buses and waited for our guides. Once there, we divided, people speaking English to the right, French speakers to the left, etc. In a queer way I was reminded how after unloading from trains, Jews were divided, women and children one way, men another. Another observation was that though all of the people who had come to Poland were Sephardim whose family were either from Greece or Turkey, we have been so dispersed, we could no longer communicate to one another, even though we were standing next to each other, virtually cousins. We all just kind of looked at each other, our little JEAA white tour badges being our only link together.

Auschwitz is divided in two camps one is called Auschwitz I, and the Auschwitz II (Auschwitz-Birkenau). The later camp is a least 10 times larger in size. The first camp is divided in "blocks." We started walking, my eyes immediately fixed and locked on the infamous iron gate which reads "Arbeit Macht Frei" [Work Makes You Free]. I started taking photos, attempted to run a video camera, and had a tape recorder with a microphone affixed to my lapel. I felt as if I needed to document everything, then come back and tell the world, hence the reason for this travel diary. Barbed wire was everywhere, as it was during the war years, however back then they were electrified. The Polish guide explained how rocks and wire were buried under the fence line so that no one could tunnel out. I can't see how anyone could get out anyway, for if you got over the tall electrified barbed wire fence, you then were inside an area where you had to climb over another fence with the same obstacles, if you were first not shot by a guard in the many towers, or attacked by savage dogs which ran in between the fences. Speaking of dogs, I noticed many people in Krakow had large vicious type dogs, including Dobermans, German Shepards, and Rottweilers. Some people had metal muzzles on their dogs. The last thing I saw as we departed Auschwitz was two large German Shepards running around as the bus drove away.

I walked with the guide for a while, but to be honest was bored with her basic history of the Shoah, and if anyone was going to "teach me," it was not going to be a Polish tour guide. I have very good knowledge on this history of my people, and how they suffered at this location. I knew if I wanted to see "everything" I would have to go on my own. Exploring on my own I found the infamous fire brigade reservoir which was built to look just like a swimming pool. Though it was a water reservoir, it was used as a swimming pool by the Germans. Modern day revisionists and anti-Jewish neo-Nazis conclude since there was a swimming pool in Auschwitz, it could not have been an extermination camp. This is high cause for alarm, as many revisionists are filling books, the Internet, and even colleges with false history. One revisionist information source states "Inmates from Auschwitz and surrounding camps enjoyed swimming and sunbathing beside the pool on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Although not as popular as sports like soccer, some competition was organized where inmates from different countries of origin, and different camps, raced in individual and relay events." There is potential for a future generation of children to actually believe their lies!

Between Blocks 10 and 11 was the "black wall." This was where people were shot and killed. Though the Polish people like to say political prisoners were killed there by the Germans, and though they were, at this place Jews were assassinated in high number. Inside Block 11 were saw "standing cells" where four men were corralled in a 3' by 3' cubicle until they were dead. I saw the "changing room" where people were ordered to strip, men on one side, women on the other. Then they were chased down a hallway and out into the courtyard by the black wall where they were shot, or occasionally hung by the neck. In the basement were the early gas chambers where the Germans practiced murdering people until they got the mixture of *Zyclon B* gas just right. I

took photos of the eye (peep) hole which the Germans used to look at their victims, and how many of the eye holes on the prisoner's side were enlarged, obviously by hand, as if the condemned tried to pick through the wooden door in a futile attempt at escaping. The ceilings were low, it was very dark, musty and cool, a quite ominous place some 60 years later. It was a heavy tourist day, and at the black wall I saw a group of Russian or Polish students being educated by their teacher. The wall was covered with flowers and burning candles. I lit a candle at the wall which I had brought in my pocket, then read Tehillim 142, and left:

Maschil of David, when he was in the cave; a Prayer.

With my voice I cry unto HaShem; with my voice I make supplication unto HaShem.

I pour out my complaint before Him, I declare before Him my trouble;

When my spirit fainteth within me--Thou knowest my path--in the way wherein I walk have they hidden a snare for me.

Look on my right hand, and see, for there is no man that knoweth me; I have no way to flee; no man careth for my soul.

I have cried unto Thee, O HaShem; I have said: 'Thou art my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.'

Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low; deliver me from my persecutors; for they are too strong for me.

Bring my soul out of prison, that I may give thanks unto Thy name; the righteous shall crown themselves because of me; for Thou wilt deal bountifully with me.

Auschwitz was not the largest death camp, but it had the most survivors. I don't recall the actual numbers, but something like 10 people survived *Treblinka*, 100 from *Bergen-Belson*, and 100,000 from *Auschwitz*, this is the reason why when you meet a survivor of the Shoah, they are usually from Auschwitz. All personal effects brought to the camp were confiscated by the Germans to be recycled to German families. Stacks of Tallitot (prayer shawls), tooth brushes, shaving creme brushes and mugs, artificial limbs and mountains of reading glasses. The shoes left by dead prisoners, shoes that looked as if their owners would return momentarily but never came back after their "showers." There were piles of hair covered with dust (and human ashes). The hair was shaved from the dead and cut from those selected for work. It was made into blankets and cloth. What we saw was but a sample of the once 30 warehouses of such items which were destroyed by the Germans as they fled the camp. I really cannot describe it. If you didn't know what happened there just 60 years ago, you would think Auschwitz might be some sort of private suburban college campus. I know a poem written by a survivor named Sonia Pilcer entitled "Imagine Auschwitz." The excerpts of this poem sums up the feeling of this evil place better than I could:

Black wire fences with their arching posts stand on either side, and high above, the spindly legs of guard towers once mounted with rifles. This starkness, a landscape of ritual murder.

Yet it is lush. Verdant grass where once there was mud, body slime. Clusters of brilliant goldenrod. Wildflowers sprout everywhere. Bushes with tiny berries. Soil enriched by human mulch.

A young man in suede shorts and hiking boots approaches from the opposite direction. He is returning. "Don't bother," he says, "There's nothing left to see at Birkenau." As he passes, his metal cup swings from his knapsack.

He's right, of course. Nothing to see, no education to be had from the open fields circumscribed by wires like a demonic grid. But I must go. The sun, brilliant all afternoon, begins its drop.

Looking ahead, I see a field covered with drops of blood. Millions of drops sparkling. Murdered Jewish blood. Walking closer, I discover a field of succulent red poppies, their petals plumped like mouths. The sun blazes as it drops into the horizon slit.

I come to the ramp of the train station. End of the line. Another Selection. That infamous pageant. Here. People were selected: right for murder, left for slave labor. I stare down the tracks. A transport could arrive. My mother's family. My father's...

One man, a Polish born Jew had joined our JEAA delegation. He was casually sitting in the sun talking to a friend on the stoop outside of one of the block houses. This struck me funny, as if a Jew sat in the same place, six decades prior, he would probably been beaten or killed. The man was holding a bag, and in broken French and English, he communicated to me he was once a prisoner here. He had with him his striped slave labor "pajamas" he was forced to wear as he made soap out of human fat. I could not believe it, but he had with him a small box a bar of "soap" with the initials "RJF," [Rein Juden Fett] which means "Pure Jewish Fat ". I have heard about this soap from a local man who lives by me in Florida, an elderly survivor, a Sephardic Jew born in Greece who told me with tears in his eyes he was forced to help make this by shoveling human fat. I have also read accounts from other survivors who have told the same story.

Auschwitz I, the smaller of the two camps, had one large gas chamber and associated crematorium still standing, looking just as if they stopped using them yesterday. There is no guide, no doorman, no security guard. Just an open bunker, used as a gas chamber and crematorium. The structure was partially underground, earthen covered. It was made of concrete, with large concrete beams going across the ceiling. The sign at the door read: *"You are in a building where the SS murdered thousands of people. Please maintain silence here: remember their suffering and show respect for their memory."* It was a cold and empty room some 50 feet by maybe 25 feet wide. In the center is a small metal table with a few lit candles on it. Walking through a passageway, you enter the crematorium, with four ovens still standing. Made out of both brick and metal, the oven were used to destroy the bodies of the Jews. Each oven had an ash box door under the main door, above through this main door is where the Jewish people's bodies were placed inside. Behind the ovens were walk down ash pits, complete with a door for both removing charred human remains, as well as wood or coal, whatever they used as a fuel source. It seems that to be efficient, the Germans would have had one or two persons in the back removing the ashes of the murder victims, while other workers pushed more bodies in the front doors of the ovens, using a system of rails and push carts which still remain today. There were even iron "trap doors" built into the side of the ovens, I guess so you could watch the progress of the fire. It is a well known fact that the Germans forced Jews to do these horrifying tasks.

Auschwitz is a very solemn place, and after going inside the visitors building where the administrative facilities were, and observing the Polish sales people at one of the booths (which sold film and books), make jokes and giggles like little children, I though it was inappropriate. In a way it bordered on being insulting to the memory of the victims. The greatest insult however

was after I walked down the stairs to the restroom and found a man standing up at the door, and a woman behind a desk guarding the entrance. I went to find restroom to wash my hands which had gotten dirty walking around, as well as for the same reason why we wash our hands when we leave a cemetery. They had a sign which read in Polish, French, English and Hebrew, *CHARGE FOR USING BATHROOM .50*, needless to say, this solidified my opinion of the Polish people, and their State run “memorial.”

We took the bus ride one mile to the large Auschwitz II (Birkenau) complex. It is important to note that the famous “March of The Living” takes place on this same route from camp to camp. It takes place on *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day). The marchers (mostly young people) walk hand in hand representing many nations, along the short distance separating Auschwitz from Birkenau. They march in silent tribute to all victims of the Shoah and in memory of the hundreds of thousands of Jews forced by the Germans to cross vast expanses of Poland’s terrain under the harshest of conditions, the infamous “death marches.” The program of the *march* starts in Israel, or continues in Israel. While marching the people declare, *Am Yisrael Hai*—The People of Israel Live! They march in silence through the gates of Birkenau, joining hands, and holding upright the blue and white flag of Israel with the Star of David emblazoned on it.

I walked through the gates and joined others in my party which were going through some of the barracks. Some survivors who came from America were prisoners at Auschwitz, and they were able to give us first hand experiences. One woman with us had not been back since she left after the war, but she had vivid memories and was able to tell us her story. Time went on, and again I slipped away from the slow moving tour guide, and went looking around by myself. I found some buildings which were open and unlocked, old barracks with concrete bunks which were at one time lined with straw, wood, or if lucky sometime of cloth. As Auschwitz-Birkenau sits today, the rail line which once brought Jews in from all over Europe, terminate at the point where the gas chambers once stood. The two pieces of track are cut off, and this is a place where now flowers and candles are often left. When I was there a group of Israeli students holding Israeli flags were sitting on the rails gently primping the candles and flowers while in deep thought. The international memorial, which is the official Polish memorial, is located on top of the location where the gas chambers once sat. You see, the rail line came through the gates of Birkenau. Once inside the gates were locked, and the people were forced off the trains. There they were immediately separated by sex, strength and health. This is the point where many families said goodbye to one another for the final time. That half mile of dirt from the gate of Birkenau to the terminal end where the memorial is today, holds the saddest history of humanity on earth, and the lowest point of Jewish collective memory since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

After about an hour of walking around we made our way to the memorial, and saw chair were being set up. The Judeo-Spanish plaque was covered in a dark blue velvet cloth. We walked around, making small talk, and reading the other plaques. People were coming down the long trail from the main gate, it was an impressive thing to see. I was shooting photos whenever I could, as again I felt I had to record this event for the sake of history. Twenty, fifty, one hundred, one hundred fifty, two hundred, two hundred fifty, maybe three hundred, they kept coming. The group of religious Jewish girls and their rabbis which I had met earlier at the cemetery happened to arrive at the time of the event. I went over and welcomed the rabbis and invited them to participate. They accepted my offer, and later I saw the girls taking copious notes on the event. One of the rabbis told me two of his girls were Sephardic. There was also a group of secular Jewish students from Israel who joined us, one of their Sephardic girls even becoming part of the ceremony, helping to light the initial memorial candle. This was not planned, it just happened.

After several dignitaries including the American and Polish Consul Generals' spoke, Kaddish was recited, then the shofar was blown. The Sarajevo-born Sephardic vocalist Flory Jagoda softly sang a song which included the lyrics, "en terras ajenas no kero morir" (in foreign lands I do not want to die). A song many prisoners sang during their internment in Auschwitz 60 years earlier. Two respected members of the Turkish Jewish community unveiled the large bronze plaque, and almost immediately members of the seven-country delegation, including many others who happened to just be visiting Auschwitz at the time of the memorial, burst into passionate tears and applause. A flood of people came up to light candles, and the crowd of Israeli youths burst an impromptu version of the Hatikva.

In Judeo-Spanish, the plaque read, "Ke Este Lugar, Ande Los Nazis, Eksterminaron Un Milyon, I Medyo De Ombres, De Mujeres I De Kriaturas, La Mas Parte Djudyos, De Varyos Payizes De La Evropa, Sea Para Syempre, Para La Umanidad, Un Grito De Dezespero, I Unas Sinyales. Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1940-1945." [For Ever Let This Place Be A Cry of Despair, And a Warning To Humanity, Where The Nazis Murdered About One and a Half Million Men, Women And Children, Mainly Jews, From Various Countries of Europe. Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1940-1945.]

Migrating after the expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, Sephardim had lived throughout the lands of the former Ottoman Empire including Greece and its surrounding islands, the Balkans, and North Africa. Vibrant Sephardic communities such as those in Monastir, Rhodes, Salonica and Yugoslavia (Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo) were all extinguished. Generally not known, were the thousands of Judeo-Spanish Jews in France, as well as communities in Holland, Germany and Austria. Many Turkish Jews who had gone to France ended up deported. Though the Ashkenazi Jews perished in much higher numbers, the extermination of the Sephardim was so devastating, their entire living culture was virtually lost. The mere fact that today there are no Greek or Turkish Synagogues in the Diaspora demonstrates the virtual extinction of the Judeo-Spanish Sephardic religious culture. In Salonica, the "Jerusalem of the Balkans," nearly the entire community was deported by the Germans.

Judeo-Spanish is a language of fusion, essentially 15th century Castilian, colored initially by regionalisms and Hispanic Arabicisms. After the expulsion of the Jews of Spain in 1492, additional words were absorbed from the various host countries to which they fled such as North Africa, the Balkans and Ottoman Turkey. It was the primary language of many Sephardic gedolim such as the Abravanel, Haim Yosef Azulai the "Hida," Moshe Kordovero the "RaMaK," Yacob Huli originator of the Me'am Lo'ez, and Yosef Caro author of the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law). "It took 60 years, but the Sephardim who were murdered finally were granted representation of their memory in their own language. When an entire culture is nearly made extinct, it can never be too late to honor them. After 57 years, and with the approval of the International Auschwitz Council and the State Museum of Auschwitz, the death of hundreds of thousands of Sephardic Jews was forever memorialized.

I hope my travelogue enlightens the reader who may have wanted to participate in the JEAA unveiling, but was unable to attend. Written, 25 Adar II 5763, March 29, 2003 Motsei Shabbat. Delray Beach, Florida.