

I PARTICIPATED IN THE MARCH OF THE LIVING 1992
by Israel Bernbaum

The first paragraphs of the "Study Guide" received by the participants, read: "...You will be transported along with 6,000 other teens from all around the world, back in time to one of the darkest chapters in human existence, to one of the most terrifying times in Jewish history. ...You will walk in the footsteps of the 6,000,000. The march from Auschwitz to Birkenau will be along the same path which once two million of our people marched to their death to the gas chambers and crematoria. You will visit the death camps of Treblinka and Majdanek..."

The B'nai B'rith Youth Organization admitted me into their ranks as a participant in the MARCH OF THE LIVING.

I am a native of Warsaw, brought up in a Jewish, culturally thriving and Yiddish speaking world. My education in a Polish public school for Jewish children strengthened my emotional and cultural ties with my Polish country, the country of my ancestors from centuries back in history. I escaped from the German designed Ghetto walls before they were sealed off.

In 1992, I was aware that I was not going to pay a visit to my motherland, Poland, but on a pilgrimage to the sites where my people were slaughtered, to the mass graveyards of our Kedoshim (Martyrs). I did not go to visit Warsaw, the city of my youth and my dreams, but, instead, I went to march on the path where my murdered people had marched.

IN WARSAW

We arrived in Warsaw, before noon, on April 28. The waiting busses brought us to the area of the former Warsaw Ghetto. We were brought to the area in which I was familiar with each corner and with each stone. From my memory emerged the Jewish

section of the city bursting with vitality, the streets with the buildings, and the endless crowds of Jews intermingled with the daily noisy, heavy traffic. Now, in the area where I lived I did not recognize anything familiar to me. Instead I found a silent, deserted, large park with pavements, with greenery and trees, and benches where people could relax.

The only signs of a once presence of 350,000 of my people are the mute figures of the Rappaport Ghetto Monument and the scattered marble blocks with engraved names of prominent Jews, who were active during the time of the Ghetto. Among them were names like those of Janusz Korczak, Dr. Ringelblum, Arthur Zygelbojm, and others. Here there is also a Mordechai Anielewicz Street, named after the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and a plaque indicating the location of his headquarters, Mila 18. There is also a Ludwik Zamenhof Street, honoring the creator of the Universal language, Esperanto. We soon came to the notorious Umschlagplatz, the place of the especially built train station, from which hundreds of thousands of Warsaw Jews were deported to Treblinka and other places of annihilation. This area of Jewish martyrdom is preserved in an impressive, dignified Memorial with walls and inscriptions in memory of the Jewish victims.

Aside from the monument and memorial plaques with Jewish names here and there, nothing remained to remind me of my Jewish Warsaw. Only the sky was left unchanged... For me the whole area was a silent, large cemetery without gravestones, surrounded by modern buildings.

I called the attention of my young fellow travellers to the fact that we were walking over the ruins and ashes of my Jewish Warsaw and its people. Thousands of bodies of our people are still buried in the ruins under the new parks and boulevards.

In the evening the young people of our group conducted a solemn ceremony at the Ghetto Monument. Six torches were lit, names of the perished were read, proper songs were sung, and Kaddish, prayer for the dead was recited. A small group of neighboring Poles observed the ceremony in silence.

We visited the old Jewish cemetery of Gesia Street, another place of significance, about the once Jewish presence in Warsaw. The "Care Taker" of the cemetery greeted us at the gates. He was a young man, who told me that he took over the caretaking function from his father. He is the only young Jewish man among the approximately 600 Jews living today in Warsaw. This young man considers it his sacred duty to remain there in order to take care of the cemetery.

The young visitors wandered among the old gravestones, reading the engraved Hebrew names of the deceased and dates, which indicated a long history of Jewish presence in Poland.

Treblinka

Treblinka is located over 60 miles from Warsaw. In the mid-1942, the Germans built on these grounds the dreadful death camp, for the exclusive purpose of annihilating the Jews of Warsaw and its vicinity. In a period of about 15 months between 800,000 to 900,000 Jews lost their lives there. Among the murdered were almost all the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. The Nazis considered Treblinka to be a "model camp" for its efficiency in the annihilation of Jews. After an armed rebellion of the inmates, the Germans obliterated all traces of its existence in order to conceal their crimes.

The Polish government rebuilt Treblinka on its original site in the form of a symbolic Memorial Museum, with symbolic gates, and symbolic train tracks. There is an impressive Memorial Mausoleum, with an engraved menorah on top, with 17,000 rocks of different sizes. Together they present an awesome symbolic cemetery which memorializes the slaughtered Jewish communities, as well as communities of other European countries. The 17,000 rocks are actually to commemorate the 6,000,000 Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The only individual

who is honored with a special stone is Janusz Korczak, the renowned Jewish Polish educator and medical doctor. The inscription reads in Polish :

"JANUSZ KORCZAK, Henryk Goldszmit, AND CHILDREN."

The young people of our group dispersed over the area. They were looking for names of communities, from which their grandparents, or relatives, survivors of the Holocaust, originated. We could see some youngsters bent over a stone in tears. Others lit candles next to the symbolic gravestones or placed flowers there. The past became present. The young Jews of today found a link with the past of their ancestors.

THE MARCH OF THE LIVING AUSCHWITZ - BIRKENAU

When our busses arrived in Auschwitz during the morning hours on Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Commemoration Day, April 30), masses of young Jewish people were waiting in march formations with signs indicating their native countries.

Our first contact with the "real" Auschwitz was when we walked through the gates over which is inscribed the infamous ARBEIT MACHT FREI (WORK WILL MAKE YOU FREE). We walked alongside rows of gloomy buildings which were surrounded by endless fences of barbed wire on electric poles and watchtowers. Our group congregated for the March in front of a building which bore a sign in Polish: BLOK SMIERCI, which means BLOCK OF DEATH.

I looked at the sky above. I was thinking that the same sky which is spreading so majestically over us, MARCHERS OF THE LIVING, was once spread over our people during their marches to their deaths. We can imagine that many of them looked up above, the only place from which they expected rescue.

The penetrating sound of a Shofar signaled the start of the MARCH. In a deep, solemn silence, six thousand marchers moved toward Birkenau. Six thousand bowed their heads trying to identify with our Martyrs, the MARCHERS OF THE DEAD.

The endless column of young people, in blue jackets, slowly moved up the hill. They presented an unforgettable spectacle. The thousands of young Jews from all corners of the world, carrying banners, and the hundreds of Israeli flags, carried by the young Israelis were the most dramatic manifestation of a Jewish presence. In my view the MARCH OF THE LIVING presented a spectacular reminder, and the most resounding protest, against the world which had made possible and allowed the genocide of our people. It was a warning that dangers still exist.

The two hour march ended with a moving commemorative ceremony on the ruins of the former crematoria of Birkenau. The ceremony started with the reading of the names of martyrs by youngsters from different countries and in different languages. It continued with moving speeches by Israeli dignitaries and ended with the lighting of six torches and the reciting of El-Mole-Rachamim and Kaddish, conducted by the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Israel Lau, himself a survivor.

Rabbi Lau appealed to the Catholic Church to apologize for the role it had played in the Holocaust. The participants lit candles on the ruins of the crematoria and inserted in the ground wooden plaques with names of martyrs.

AUSCHWITZ AND BIRKENAU AS MUSEUMS

The next day, our Polish guides brought us to Auschwitz for a tour of the inside of the buildings, including the "Block of Death." They eloquently explained what had taken place in the rooms during the German rule. They showed us the "interrogation" room, the torture chambers, the terrifying cells in dark cellars, and the bunks on which the prisoners had slept while awaiting their deaths. We were standing at the "Wall of Executions," at which visitors lit candles and laid flowers. The buildings in Auschwitz, now converted into a Museum, bear live testimony to the horrors of the past. The display of prayer shawls (taletim), the piles of human hair, the luggage bearing Jewish names from different countries, the piles of

shoes, and accumulated objects taken from the victims, all made a staggering impression on the visitors. Before leaving Auschwitz we visited the crematorium, with its high chimney, gas chambers, and ovens.

Our next stop was again Birkenau, but this time to see the "Museum." Birkenau presented an awesome vast conglomeration of endless barracks, chimneys, and miles of fences of barbed wire hooked to a forest of electric poles. The immensity of the camp revealed the enormity of the German murder machine.

The insides of some barracks were converted into show places. Some of them presented rows of bunks. Others displayed large photographs showing prisoners and their tormentors in action. We could graphically see staggering statistics about the murders. There were memorial plaques, in a few languages, which honored the victims.

We were gathered in one of the Birkenau barracks, where we sat among the rows of bunks, and listened to a woman, a survivor of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Our youth listened in horror to the story. She told of her miraculous survival from this place of death and torture.

MAJDANEK

Our last stop, before our departure for Israel, was another man-made hell - Majdanek - near the city of Lublin. We came again to endless barracks, surrounded by watchtowers and by miles of barbed wire attached to electric poles. We again saw the bunks on which the prisoners had slept. Once again we saw tons of human hair and mountains of shoes. A tall chimney, seen from afar, indicated a crematorium. We were not mistaken. The building housed large gas chambers and many ovens. Now we could see in the ovens flowers and flickering candles to honor the victims. The Germans, after retreating, had left behind mountains of human ashes.

The Polish Government built an impressive structure, a Mausoleum, over the ashes of tens of thousands of victims.

An inscription in Polish on the Mausoleum reads: OUR FATE IS A WARNING TO YOU (NASZ LOS WASZA PRZESTROGA).

Our visit to Majdanek culminated with a moving memorial ceremony and services conducted by the young participants on the steps of the Mausoleum. A large banner was displayed with the inscription: CAIN, WHERE IS ABEL THY BROTHER? ... THE VOICE OF THY BROTHER'S BLOOD CRIETH UNTO ME FROM THE GROUND. Genesis IV 8. Prayers for the dead were recited at the end of the services. "Hatikva" was sung before we walked to the waiting busses. We were on our way to Israel.

The next day, in Israel, a huge banner in Hebrew and English greeted us on our arrival at Ben Gurion airport:

WELCOME TO ISRAEL.

Later another banner greeted us:

MARCH OF THE LIVING
FROM THE VALLEY OF DESOLATION TO THE DOORWAY OF HOPE

POLAND AND "THE MARCH OF THE LIVING"

During our presence in Poland, the only Polish people with whom we came in contact were those who were assigned to assist us in a variety of services. They were courteous, polite, and efficient. Our guides, with whom we spent most of our time during our travels, were charming Polish young people who had mastered English well and who were very helpful.

I believe that the Polish State does important work in the preservation of camps like Treblinka, Auschwitz, and Majdanek. I noticed that the Jewish martyrdom is not ignored but neither is it emphasized enough. People, who visited Poland before, found some improvement in presentation of the Holocaust as compared to previous years. However, I found that the exclusivity of Jewish martyrdom is still much blurred. There still exists the aftermath of perpetuating the Communist policy of denying or ignoring the Holocaust. There is now hope that the new democratic Poland will reveal the history of the Holocaust in its full magnitude.

In the gift-shop of Treblinka I bought a set of 20 slides with an explanatory brochure in Polish. These serve as an example of how the murder of Jews is generalized as an event among other German atrocities. My above description presents the genuine character of the death camp, Treblinka. However, the brochure begins with a statement that in Treblinka were imprisoned Polish as well as Jewish people. The 17,000 rocks present "a symbolic cemetery of the victims of Hitlerien barbarism," ignoring the fact that actually they symbolize a cemetery of the 6,000,000 Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. Six slides present the rocks as merely "A symbolic cemetery." There are 130 rocks with "engraved names of locations from where victims originated." The 10 larger rocks with names of European countries, are explained: "countries from where murdered Jews originated." Three slides, however, show graves with crosses. The explanation reads: "graves of murdered."

The brochure ends with a statement: "It (Treblinka) is one of the most tragic memorials of martyrdom in Poland." It is stated that the camp Treblinka engulfed 800,000 Jews of Poland and of other European countries, but the impression which the reader and viewer of the slides receives is that Treblinka presents a Memorial for Polish martyrdom. The tragic role of Treblinka in the extermination of the Jews is blurred, or left in the background as another episode of "martyrdom in Poland." This is an eloquent example of how the Holocaust is still presented in Poland.

The Polish papers, which I read in Cracow, reported the March in only a few small paragraphs. In general the voices were sympathetic. The reports emphasized the significance of the MARCH OF THE LIVING and the importance for the Jews to remember the 6,000,000 victims of the Holocaust. One title was "A Return to Hell," another "They Arrived to Believe." The "Gazeta Wyborcza," furnished a larger report entitled "A Refusal to Forget," together with a photograph of the MARCH. Another moving photograph from Birkenau, entitled "The Cursed Soil," was also produced. The caption read: "...Again cries,

silent prayers, camera flashes. One of the wooden plaques, inserted in the ground of the rail track, had an inscription in English, 'Peace to the victims, honor to the Righteous Gentiles'." All the reports described the arrival of 5,000 young Jews from 44 countries. They reported the ceremonies in Birkenau and spoke of the Israeli dignitaries who had delivered speeches. To my knowledge, there was no Polish official participation in the MARCH or in any ceremonies connected with the MARCH.

The general impression was that the Holocaust and the whole project of the MARCH OF THE LIVING was of no concern to the Polish people and the Polish Government. It was purely a Jewish enterprise, with the active involvement of Israel. The six thousand Marchers were treated as any other tourists who come to visit Poland, with the exception of the unusual security. The Tourist Agencies provided comfort and efficient services. The Polish authorities provided security and made available for our exclusive uses the places of interest. Everywhere that we appeared we found the places guarded by police and deserted by people. We were practically isolated from the Polish population.

The following report in the Cracow "Dziennik Polski" (Polish Daily) of 4.30-5.1, 1992, under the headline: "March of the Living" explained: "A day before the arrival of the first group of Jews, rumors circulated in the city that the MARCH could be disrupted by Nationalists and Skinheads. Information from some sources persisted that followers of Boleslaw Tejkowski arrived at this time to Auschwitz.

The Chief Police Commissioner, Maciej Stanek, stated that he knows nothing about it. However, great police forces with special units were displayed around the Camp and the whole surrounding area of the MARCH. Since a few days, Auschwitz is practically a closed city. Incoming trains and roads are under surveillance. The territory surrounding the camp is constantly patrolled. No person has access without special permission .

The situation is still more complicated by the fact that Rabbi Weiss from New York announced his participation, the same person who had unleashed a storm around the Auschwitz Convent. Not long ago he summoned Cardinal Josef Glemp to court. The organizers of the MARCH and the police believe, however, that during this day no incidents will occur."

We indeed did not witness any incidents. It is noteworthy that, during our presence in Poland, strict instructions were given to the participants of the MARCH, for security reasons, not to leave the group and not to leave the hotel of our residence. The article in "Nowy Dziennik" made clear the rationale for such precautions.

One of the Polish papers (WPROST) reported that a delegation of 25 Jewish youth from Poland had participated in the March. If this is true, we regret that they did not address us as representatives of the Host country, Poland, or that they did not, at least, bring us greetings from the Jewish community living in Poland.

In the Cracow synagogue, we had an opportunity to meet a few elderly Jews. It was Friday afternoon. They came to be ready for Sabbath services. I spoke with them in Yiddish. Before the war Cracow had 60,000 Jews. Now there are about 200 elderly Jews. There is not one young Jewish person. I asked about anti-Semitism. There are gangs of nationalists and skinheads led by Boleslaw Tejkowski who publishes a paper, that spreads frightening anti-Jewish propaganda. These few Jews live not only in extreme poverty, but must also endure fear for their lives. One of the elderly Jews commented: "There are no Jews, but still dreadful anti-Semitism." This was my first hand information about Jewish life in one of the major Polish cities, Cracow. The Polish Government, however, insists that "the few anti-Semitic incidents" in Poland must not be attributed to the general Polish public.

Our impression, during our short presence in Poland, was that the country of prewar 3,500,000 Jews, the cradle of "the Golden Age" of Jewish culture, with a 1,000 year history of Jewish life, is practically a country without Jews.

In the prewar Polish parliament and Polish press there were endless debates about the "Jewish Problem in Poland," and the Jews were endlessly plagued by Polish official, "half official," and popular anti-Semitism. The prewar "battle cry" of Polish Anti-Semites, "Polska bez Zydow!" (Poland without Jews!) became a painful reality. The Marchers of the Living were witnesses to this tragic truth.

THE IMPACT ON THE YOUNG PARTICIPANTS

Months before the departure for the MARCH OF THE LIVING, the participants received Study Guides for the forthcoming trip to Poland. They contained basic information about the Holocaust, its history, its origin, and a list of recommended reading. The Jewish young people were equipped with knowledge and were well prepared for the Kingdom of Death with its gruesome headquarters preserved on the Polish soil. No books, not even any intensive studies about the Holocaust, could replace what our young people experienced and sensed by personally walking through the Auschwitz gates with its sign, ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Nothing could strengthen their determination to speak out against the injustices of the world more than seeing, walking on the grounds, and breathing the air of Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka, or Majdanek.

The young participants looked at the horrors in disbelief and consternation. Some broke down in tears. They cried on each other's shoulders. Some of them, hugging each other, shed tears over a candle which they lit for the souls of the Martyrs. The "Holocaust" was changed from a story to a reality. The unbelievable became believable. The impossible to imagine became horribly real. Unceasingly they flashed their cameras to take with them these memories. The Polish experience turned

these participants into live witnesses. All of them expressed a commitment and a determination to bear witness, to bring the story home, and to share it with others. The Marchers of the Living will join the ranks of survivors to stand up against the deniers and so called revisionists. They will fight lies and misconceptions with words of truth, and with harsh facts. They will become messengers of brotherhood, justice and equality for all, because they witnessed a world ruled by hatred, injustice, and racism.

May the initiators and the organizers of the MARCH OF THE LIVING be blessed . Their accomplishments consist in building bridges between the Jewish past and the Jewish future. Such bridges will lead to a brighter Jewish future and to a better world.

The 6,000 young Jewish Marchers in Auschwitz - Birkenau manifested by their presence a reminder to the Western World with its Christian Civilization that it is solely responsible for the Auschwitizes and the Holocaust. The lesson of the MARCH OF THE LIVING must be universal.

The MARCH OF THE LIVING 1992 proved that the only trustful carriers of the banners of REMINDING and WARNING are the survivors of the Holocaust, their children, and the Jews of the world led by the Jews of Israel.