

# Remember Amalek

By ROBERT SCHWARTZ, *Special to The Chronicle*

*"Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt -- how, undeterred by fear of G-d, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. . . . Do not forget! (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)*

The Polish State Museum Auschwitz exhibit contained chilling photographs and artifacts salvaged from the camp that brought home the individual human dimension of the Holocaust: piles of shoes, leather suitcases, pre-war family photos, prayer shawls, human hair, crematorium ashes, and the infant's hand-knit sweater that some desperate mother may have hastily helped her child to remove as they prepared to die in each other's arms.

One of the guides, a burly man in his 50's with a prominent jaw, was a former Marine colonel, now a history teacher. Having taught the Holocaust for many years, he was sharing information about the exhibit with the other guides:

"Auschwitz was a slave labor and death camp. Sobibor, Belzec, Maidanek were death factories exclusively."

As he spoke, I was struck by his strong, booming voice that seemed driven by an undercurrent of anger, a cadence I at first attributed to past military drills. My wife and I spoke alone with him later. Four years ago, while driving with his maternal great-uncle through the Israeli desert, he learned for the first time that 36 members of his mother's side of the family perished in the Holocaust.

Through this sole relative, another branch of his family had survived and began to rebuild in Israel. As he spoke, his eyes welled with tears and he wept. Surprised by the sudden emotion in this seemingly hardened man, I mumbled awkwardly, "It must be very difficult."

He replied, his arm on my shoulder, "We're brothers now, G-d bless you."

While leading a group of adults through the exhibit, I focused attention on the individual human experience

being touched. Several adults joined along as we proceeded through the exhibit.

I turned to a black and white photo of grim contrasts showing two corpses lying in the snow: "As the Russians advanced to liberate Auschwitz, the nazis attempted to destroy as much evidence of their crime as possible. After bombing crematoria and burning documentation, they forced the remaining camp prisoners on brutal death marches as they retreated westward. Any stragglers who faltered from starvation or exhaustion were shot immediately or left to freeze along the way."

An older, vital looking man with an expressive and ruddy face apologetically interrupted and asked if he could now take over. "If you don't mind, I have something I want to share with you all."

He told his story in a quiet, but intense way, becoming increasingly more emotional and agitated as he spoke. As an American Air Force squadron leader, he had lost his entire crew during an unsuccessful mission over the North Sea and was later captured by the Germans in Belgium. After a period as prisoner of war in Stalag 17, he was on a death march westward and met with a number of other marching groups.

"Was bist du?" he urgently asked each group in turn, attempting to orient himself to what was going on. They answered, "French, Roumanian, Belgian, and so on." He then came upon a vastly different group, emaciated and beaten.

"Was bist du? Was bist du? Was bist du?" he repeatedly asked. There were no responses from this group except the vacant stares and stillness. Finally, a weak,

quivering voice shattered the silence: "Jude." Another whispered desperately, "Wir haben Hunger."

The old man became impassioned, and with his voice cracking as he fought off tears, slowly and emphatically clarified, "They weren't hungry. Th... they... were... starving."

"In front of this group of Jews," he continued, "two bodies were lying dead in the snow, as in that picture. They were lined up along the sides of a narrow street that was too tight to allow movement. An SS officer in a jeep drove through, senselessly swinging a club at these poor Jews. He clubbed at them and kept beating at them as he drove."

"When he was through, nine more were dead in the snow. And I will, as long as I live, never forget this image. This sight will be with me always."

This man's story, the images and intensity of his emotion, continue to haunt me: "Was bist du? Was bist du?" . . . "Jude" . . . "They weren't hungry, they were starving" . . . "He clubbed at them" . . . "Nine more dead in the snow."

Remember Amalek.

*(Dr. Robert Schwartz is a clinical psychologist and adjunct assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.)*

