

# **A Quest to Qualify: Finding My Place as a Holocaust Historian**

**by Bonnie M. Harris**

No one could have imagined that someone like myself would presume to become a Holocaust historian, least of all me. There were so many qualifications that I believed I lacked – most importantly, I thought, was the fact that I was not Jewish. While I had a better than average knowledge of the history of the Jews, being a long-time instructor of Biblical History in the Institute Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, my prior academic scholarship had focused on the Ancient Near East and Classical Greek and Roman histories. I had never even entertained the idea of pursuing Holocaust studies until 2003 when one singular event changed the course of my academic and professional careers – I met a gentleman who had been deceased for over 40 years.

**Huh?!**

Well, that begs for an immediate explanation. You see, I am an archivist. To put it bluntly, I handle personal documents, photographs, and other kinds of material items from mostly dead people. I preserve the history of their lives, and in so doing, contribute to the preservation of communal and institutional histories. I met Cantor Joseph Cysner in the spring of 2003, forty-two years after his death, when his widow, Sylvia Cysner, donated his personal papers to the Jewish Historical Society of San Diego, where I worked as an archivist. I had just recently been accepted into the PhD program in Public History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I planned on writing a regional history of Jews in San Diego as my doctoral dissertation. No sooner did I begin to process the newly accessioned collection of Cantor Joseph Cysner, then I knew I had found the story of a life-time – the Holocaust odyssey of a survivor from both Nazi

and Japanese imprisonments. As I started to contemplate making his story the center piece of my dissertation, I knew it would change the entire direction of my program studies. Instead of concentrating on US History with a focus in American Jewish History, and more specifically Jewish history in California, this would steer me into Modern Jewish History of Europe. I would be looking at the history of anti-Semitism, regional Jewish histories in Germany and Poland, and, more importantly, be focusing on the Holocaust and all that implied, which at the time I couldn't even fathom. During my first quarter at UCSB, I consulted with my department head, who helped me explore the pros and cons of changing the focus of my program. After submitting a preliminary paper on Cantor Cysner's Holocaust odyssey from Zbaszyn to Manila, my program advisors all agreed that this story was too good to pass over. Okay. Fine. My program outline was adjusted and Professor Harold Marcuse, a Modern German historian, agreed to be my dissertation advisor. The graduate division at UCSB allowed Professor Lawrence Baron, then Director of the Lipinsky Institute for Judaic Studies at San Diego State University, for whom I also worked as his administrative assistant, to act as my program mentor in Modern Jewish Studies. Okay. Fine. Paper work done. But what did it *really* mean? I now literally had in my hands a Holocaust survivor's story, fragmentarily preserved at best, that crossed several fields of Holocaust scholarship that I didn't even know about yet. Where does one so unqualified as I begin a quest to become a Holocaust historian?

I began to fill my home office with films, books, and journal articles – titles on Jewish histories; ancient, medieval, modern, European, and American; titles on anti-Semitism, genocide, Diaspora; titles on the Holocaust, testimonies of survivors, histories of the events, and even psychological studies of the effects of Holocaust related trauma. As a public historian, I also assembled works on Holocaust memory – memorials, museums, and witnesses. I had converted

one of the upstairs bedrooms of our home into a library cum study with wall to wall bookcases and filing cabinets. And as I gathered I started reading. I read constantly. I was never without a book or journal article in my hand, no matter where I went. I read and wrote in the margins as I read, making notes to myself and asking questions that I would further pursue. And the more I read, the more I realized how ignorant I was. How did I ever think that I could internalize all this information? If it was not historical dates, facts, and figures churning in my head, then it was horrific mental scenes of torture and torment from survivors churning up my stomach. Insomnia started to set in from the stress of study coupled with trying to maintain a normal life style with my family. Normal soon changed. After all, I was a wife and a mother, working two part-time jobs while commuting to school over 200 miles away. There was nothing normal about any of it. And more than the academic and professional load, there was something happening to me – I was changing and it scared me.

I have never been one to run from a battle or to shrink from a challenge and yet I was positive that I was doing both. The battle wasn't the books and the challenge wasn't the commute – it was something much more ephemeral, something so swift and fleeting that just when I thought I had it, it would be gone. No matter how hard I tried, how much I read, analyzed, studied, compared, wrote, edited, listened, viewed – I felt I was failing. I could not wrap my head around the enormity of it. I didn't understand it. Oh, I could explain it – historically, academically, psychologically, geographically, and even historiographically – but I couldn't explain rationally, and certainly not emotionally. The closer I got to it on a human, emotional level, the more transient it became and the more detached from it as a human being I became. And that is what scared me. I felt myself becoming de-sensitized to its horrors and as much as I didn't want that to happen, I knew to a certain point it had to in order to preserve my

objectivity as a historian. And that made me feel guilty. I started to question whether I had the right, as a non-Jew, as a non-sufferer of generations of anti-Semitism, and more especially as a non-sufferer of Holocaust atrocities, to even be a Holocaust historian. Perhaps it was something I could only aspire to and never achieve – like a journey that never reaches a destination.

My PhD program course work came and went – exams came and went – and the final phase of travel and research loomed ahead before I would be ready to sum it all up into the written word of a doctoral dissertation – my contribution to the mass field of Holocaust scholarship. I had already done preliminary research at various archival venues in the United States, such as the National Archives in DC, the JDC (Joint Dist.) and the Center for Jewish Studies in NYC. I had also visited many Holocaust museums, as I am ultimately a public historian with a desire to produce a post-doctoral museum exhibit and film documentary based on my research. Oddly enough, my visits to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, the Holocaust Museum in New York City, the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, and even the new Holocaust Museum at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem only heightened my fears of futility in my quest to qualify as a historian in the field of Holocaust studies.

The time came to plunge myself into the European phase of my research. I laid out a one-month itinerary, to be accompanied by a dear friend who would act as my research assistant. I would follow the life of Cantor Cysner, finding the places where he had been, while searching through repositories in Poland and Germany for the ever elusive singular piece of paper that makes all the time and money spent in finding it – worth it. I also decided that I would make this research trip in Europe an extension of my mission to mold myself into a Holocaust historian and that meant I needed to visit the places of the Holocaust. I needed to see the camps, former sites of the ghettos, places of life and death, commission and submission, those places that defined the

Holocaust. We would first fly into Warsaw and spend time seeing the remnants of the ghetto and other sites of Jewish interest. I scheduled private tour guides to take us to the camp sites of Majdanek and Belzec near Lublin. My carefully planned itinerary then took us to Krakow, where I prepaid for tours of Auschwitz and Birkenau, the site of the Podgorze Ghetto and the Kazimierz District of Krakow. In another couple of days, the schedule would take us to the Czech Republic for a tour of the former Jewish District of Prague, as well as the Theresienstadt Ghetto site and the Terezin prison camp. Leaving Prague, I routed our itinerary through Linz, making a stop to see the Mauthausen Concentration Camp before continuing on to Salzburg for some “R and R.”

After leaving Salzburg, we would continue north to Munich, where I booked tours of the sites of the Third Reich with a trip to Dachau. Then it was on to Berlin for one week, where we would see Sachsenhausen as well as more sites of the Third Reich. I had several repositories of German and Jewish history to visit in Berlin and I especially wanted to see the new Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. I also knew that I had to make a special trip to Zbaszyn, the border refugee camp in Poland, at some point in my trip. After Berlin, when my research assistant would leave for home, my last scheduled week would be spent in Hamburg alone, where I would find the Holocaust memorial sites in the Jewish District of Altona and visit the Neuengamme Concentration Camp and Museum. In Hamburg I hoped to find Cantor Cysner’s address and the Verband Synagogue where he worked when he was arrested and deported to Poland. I had already made contact with various repositories whose directors awaited my arrival in order to help me with my research on the *Polenaktion* and the Zbaszyn Deportations. It took me two full weeks to plan out the itinerary, reserve the plane tickets, order the train passes, book the hotels, and arrange for the tours. It took me four weeks to execute it. The itinerary ran like a well-oiled machine, with very few deviations from the schedule. But what I couldn’t plan for –

what became the heart and soul of the trip – were the emotional connections, and sometimes lack thereof, experienced on my own personal Holocaust odyssey.

When we arrived in Warsaw, I was momentarily stunned by its beauty. My Warsaw, the one in my books and in my head, was a bombed-out city of rubble. When I saw a modern and beautiful city, fears of futility washed over me. How was I going to connect this Warsaw with the Warsaw of the Holocaust? That thought nagged at me all that first day as we joined a guided tour that showed us all of Warsaw's favorite non-Jewish tourist sites. My real Holocaust journey did not begin until the next day.

Whether one would consider us brave travelers or stupid tourists can probably still be debated, but my assistant and I prepared our backpacks that day and headed for the train station, where we boarded a morning train to Lublin. Neither of us spoke nor read Polish so obtaining assistance in reading the train departure boards was crucial. I quickly learned that it was better to speak English than German, as Poles seemed more willing to help an American than a German, and certain forms of elementary sign language are really very universal! When we arrived in Lublin, our guide Slawek met us at the station. As this was the early part of July, the weather was quite warm and his air-conditioned touring van was very comfortable. Our first stop that day was the site of the Majdanek Concentration Camp and it was here that I began to make my own personal connection to the Holocaust in a very literal, very visceral manner.

For any readers who may not know the history of Majdanek, I will briefly give it here. At the end of July 1941, Heinrich Himmler, Nazi commandant of the SS and the Gestapo, decided on the foundation of a concentration camp in Lublin called Majdanek, which became the eastern most situated Nazi camp in Europe at that time. The early plans envisioned a camp large enough to house 250,000 prisoners at one time. These grandiose plans were curtailed when German war

difficulties arose resulting in only one-fifth of the original plans being realized between 1941 and 1944. The camp was composed of prisoner barracks, workshops, administration buildings, mass murder installations – gas chambers and crematorium – security-fencing, watchtowers, and sentry boxes. Like other concentration camps, Majdanek had its branch of subsidiary camps and labor detachments for work outside the camp.

The first prisoners at Majdanek were Russian POWs brought from a camp in Chelm. From the early days of Majdanek, transports of prisoners came in from other camps – from Auschwitz, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Dora, Ravensbrück, Flossenbürg, and Neuengamme. At the turn of 1941-1942, Majdanek became the center of detention for Jews from Lublin and its surrounding areas. Transports of Jews on a massive scale then began arriving in April 1942, first from Slovakia and the Czech Republic and then from other countries: Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, and Holland. From mid 1942 to mid 1943, transports from the ghettos in Lublin, Warsaw, and Bialystok predominated. For them, Majdanek was both a concentration camp and a death camp. Overall, there were about 300,000 prisoners brought to Majdanek of over 50 nationalities. Jews constituted the most numerous group, 41%, Polish prisoners coming in second with 35%.

In Majdanek, there was no continuous numeration as in other camps, but rather a rotation of numbers. When the figure reached 20,000, the newcomers received the numbers left vacant by the dead or those released from the camp. In addition, markings were used to show the reason for imprisonment and the nationality. This was accomplished by the infamous triangles of different colors. Prisoner barracks divided into fields marked the central part of the camp. Each field was a rectangle surrounded by a double line of barbed wire fence equipped with high voltage installations. Around the six fields stood eighteen raised watchtowers where the SS stood on duty

day and night. Every field had twenty-four barracks in two rows with a roll call square and a gallows in the center. Outside the rectangle of the fields stood mass murder installations, workshops and storage barracks, SS living quarters and the commandant's lodgings.

The irony of this being the first Nazi death camp liberated by Allied forces and it being the first camp I visited on my journey was lost on me at our arrival. I was both afraid and excited at the same time – almost giddy with nervous expectation. What an outrageous emotion to have had at that time! Let me describe first what I saw. At the site of the former camp today are preserved the old wooden barracks in Field III, fencing of five fields and the watchtowers. Also still standing are the gas chambers next to Field I and the reconstructed crematorium beyond Field V. Most of the workshops, built along side the road way, are used today as exhibition areas. On July 2, 1947, the Republic of Poland gave over the area of the former camp and all that remained of the camp site to the State Museum of Majdanek by so that it could be preserved for all time as the Monument to Martyrdom.

When we arrived, there were no other visitors at the camp. Only as we neared the end of our tour, did a school group of teenagers arrive. Having a private tour of this most dismal of all camp sites allowed me to have sustained, quiet moments of reflection, as I viewed and touched actual walls, floors, doorways, and chambers where victims had once stood. Just that realization alone had profound consequences for me. During its years of operation, the living conditions at Majdanek were the most primitive of all the camps. The thin cotton striped uniforms provided no protection from the rain and snow while inmates remained wet in the winter and often froze to death. In the early years of the camp, prisoners slept on straw spread over cold, bare ground. Later, wood floors were put in and three-tier plank beds without mattresses were filled with straw and wood shavings instead. Typhoid epidemics, diarrhea, tuberculosis, dysentery, scurvy,

scabies and mental disorders raged due to the ever deteriorating sanitary conditions, malnutrition, lice, and rodents. Prisoners were exposed not only to accelerated “natural” death, but also experienced direct genocide in the forms of executions and gassings on a mass scale. Gas chambers were in use at Majdanek from mid 1942 on. The victims were mainly Jews selected for death directly upon arrival. Other forms of executions were hangings, clubbings and beatings, strangulations, and drownings in water reservoirs and cesspits. Of the 235,000 deaths at Majdanek, 48% were Jews, 31% were Poles, 16% were from the Soviet Union, and the remainder came from all other nationalities. I knew its history. I had studied it well before we arrived. Now I was there, seeing the walls of the gas chambers that still witnessed the use of Zyklon- B for exterminations in the blue stains from the crystals embedded in the sides of the walls. The first corpses were buried in collective graves and from mid 1942 they were burned in the crematoria and on pyres.

In the first crematorium, two furnaces burning crude oil had a capacity yield of 200 bodies per day. To facilitate greater numbers of bodies burning hotter and faster, the new crematorium, designed by the Berlin firm of K. Kori, had five stoves and burned coal. Of the 300,000 prisoners interned at Majdanek, 235,000 died at Majdanek. 45,000 were transferred to other camps, 20,000 were released, and only 1500 were liberated. What my mind could not wrap itself around in my studies, some inner, deeper consciousness did here at this site – but for only one fleeting moment. When I placed my hand upon the side wall of the gas chamber, scarred by blue stains, for one brief moment I connected, a moment so minute it could be measured in the blink of an eye but so powerful that it pierced me to my core. I can’t really describe it, nor fully explain it. It was painful and terrorizing and yet joyful at the same time. I do not presume to suggest that it was an empathic pain – it was not their pain – it was my own pain. My level of

imagination had been heightened through my bodily senses and in the touching, seeing, and smelling it became more real than it had ever been before. I somehow came closer to understanding it on a human level, rather than on an academic level. And for me, it was joyful to know that the human being in me could still reel with that awareness. It was only for a moment, but the awareness lingered with me as we continued with our tour of the sites at Majdanek. Just when I thought I understood blinders fell off me like scales from a filleted fish. I stood in front of the enormous circular concrete mausoleum encasing a huge mound of human ash – victims of Majdanek. Whatever protective scales I may have still had were stripped away. I was stunned, raw, and exposed. I wanted my shield of ignorance back and at the same time I greeted the pain. I circled the bunker of ash, running my hands along the ledge of the opening as I went. Startled, I looked down and felt a silky gray dust on my hands. Deliberately and slowly I wiped it onto my clothes. We left Majdanek, but its presence has stayed me, lingering in my mind as the cold cinders did upon my skin. In utter quietude, we headed for the new memorial site at Belzec.

Immediately following the decision of the Nazi authorities to implement "Aktion Reinhard," the code name for the Nazi plan to murder Polish Jews, the Germans began construction of three death camps in Poland, designed for the purpose of exterminating the Jews living in the region known as the "Generalgouvernement." On November 1, 1941, Belzec, the first of the three death camps, the others being Treblinka and Sobibor, was the first death camp in which the Nazis killed their victims using stationary gas chambers. The annihilation of the Jews at Belzec lasted for only nine months, between March and December of 1942, but in that time over half a million exterminations took place, mostly Polish and foreign Jews, and small groups of non-Jewish Poles and Gypsies. Corpses were buried in 33 mass graves located within the perimeter of the camp site, which was at most 400 meters square. It was this practice of mass

burials within the camp area itself that caused the Germans to abandon the camp when the Fall and Winter weather caused the bodies of the buried to swell and literally push themselves up out of the ground. This presented great health dangers for the perpetrators.

Between December 1942 and April 1943, transports no longer arrived at the camp and during these months, Jewish prisoners opened the mass graves and burned the bodies of the gassed victims on huge pyres of layered railroad ties. In June 1943, the camp was totally liquidated and all the buildings destroyed. No significant physical evidence of the victims was ever to be found at the site and the transport lists were also destroyed. The victims of Belzec died in an anonymous mass and only two official survivors of the camp lived to provide post-war testimonies of life and death at Belzec.

For many years Belzec was the most forgotten camp of the Holocaust. The memorial that now exists at the site, designed by Andrzej Solyga, Zdzislaw Pidek, and Marcin Roszczyk, opened in a solemn ceremony on June 3, 2004 as a joint project of the American Jewish Committee and the Council for the Protection of the Memory of Combat and Martyrdom in Warsaw. The complex consists of a memorial to the victims who were murdered in the camp and a museum with an exhibition about the history of the Belzec death camp.

The memorial site is a huge field of randomly sized concrete rubble that covers the entire camp area of Belzec, with a center path through the site reminiscent of "Die Schleuse" (The Sluice), a camouflaged barbed wire path that led from the undressing and barber barracks straight to the gas chambers, which were also camouflaged with netting on raised poles. This Interstice, which cuts through the earth, shows that the camp was built on a slope. The path leading to a granite wall is six hundred feet long and the cut through the earth is thirty feet deep. Between 1997 and 1999, before the memorial was built, a survey team of archeologists from

Nicolas Copernicus University of Torun, led by Professor Andrzej Kola, drilled down into the earth at Belzec and found the locations of 33 mass graves. Darkly colored areas of the concrete rubble field demarcate the locations of these mass graves. The remains of literally thousands of unburned bodies were found. Out of respect for the dead, the graves remained covered and the bodies were not exhumed, so no identifications were made. According to the USHMM, these were the bodies of the Jews who were forced to dig up the mass graves at Belzec and burn the bloated bodies on pyres. A memorial path completely encircles the entire site and bears the names of all the communities of the Jewish victims who were murdered at Belzec.

Our visit to Belzec was very nearly as impactful as was our visit to Majdanek. Even though the memorialization was abstract in its nature, I believe the effectiveness of the conceptualization at Belzec had much to do with the fact that I had just recently witnessed my first literal site of commission at Majdanek, the first actual Holocaust camp I had ever personally seen. Slawek, our guide, gave us a thorough tour of the Belzec memorial site and his narration did not hold back any of the most gruesome facts about the camp. Again, we were the only visitors there at the time, and the solitude was only interrupted by the sound of our own voices or by the occasional rustling sounds made by the breezes in the tops of the trees that surrounded the site. The walk through the center path of the camp literally imposed a feeling on me of walking into a grave, which we were essentially doing— walking through the center of a mass grave yard once called Belzec. This abstraction of presentation, while masterfully designed and executed and, indeed, the only method of memorialization possible at a site completely destroyed and overcome by the elements, actually restrained the history of the site. As a buffer of the reality, abstraction made it easier for us to internalize the history, allowing us to assimilate the message of the literal events at a level of understanding and perception that was more comfortable for our

own mental faculties. In the area of the rail ramps where the train cars stopped to unload their human cargo, stood a memorial fashioned after the pyres that were constructed for the burning of the corpses from the mass graves. I was impressed and touched by this memorial site, and yet felt a gnawing emptiness, a disconnection to the enormity of Belzec's atrocities.

We did not tour the Jewish sites of Warsaw until the next day, after our return from the Lublin region. Interestingly enough, I had to hire a private guide in order to have a tour of the Jewish sites of Warsaw. I thought there would have been a greater public interest resulting in group tours. As we toured the locations of the Warsaw ghettos, remnants of the ghetto wall, the famous Nathan Rapoport Memorial to the Ghetto Fighters, and several other sites of memory and commemoration, I was more disturbed by the fact that we were the only visitors to these sites at the time, aside from a small private group of Israeli students visiting the remnants of the ghetto wall. Several other disturbing facts about Holocaust memory in Warsaw bothered me during our visits that I need to share, but first let me briefly give a historical review.

During the siege of Warsaw in the Invasion of Poland in 1939, about 1150 bombing sorties by German aircraft were flown on September 25th in an effort to terrorize the defenders into surrendering. 500 tons of high explosive bombs and 72 tons of incendiary bombs were dropped on the city. The Germans did not hesitate to bomb civilian targets and hospitals marked with the Red Cross symbol. In the course of the war approximately 84% of the city was destroyed largely due to German mass bombings, but heavy artillery fire also contributed to its decimation. Towards the end of 1940, the occupying German forces set up an area in the central and northern part of the city where all Jewish inhabitants were to be concentrated. Some 350,000 Jews lived in Warsaw prior to WWII, the majority occupying that part of the city where the ghetto was created. Jews who lived in other districts of Warsaw, as well as those who inhabited

little towns and villages on the outskirts of the city, were forced to move into the ghettos. Before the 1942 deportations to the death camp, Treblinka, more than 400,000 Jews were confined in the Warsaw ghettos; by 1942, one third of this number had died of starvation and disease. Once the whole population of the two ghettos was deported, the district encompassing some 750 acres was leveled to the ground.

The Warsaw ghetto wall, which was about 10 feet high and 10 miles in total length, separated the Jewish districts, a large and a small ghetto, from the rest of the city. Any Jews outside of the ghettos could have only survived with help from the Poles. It is estimated that about 20,000 Warsaw Jews used that help and managed to survive the war in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. A piece of the ghetto wall is preserved in a courtyard between Zlota and Sienna Streets. Since the late 70's local resident and army veteran Mieczyslaw Jedruszczak has fought to preserve the historical site from being a victim of urban expansion. This frail, elderly man showed us picture albums he had created in an effort to share the history of the site with visitors, few even though we were. I had to wonder what was going to happen to this rare piece of history after he passed on. Who would take over his mission? As an archivist, the probable eventual loss of the historical site abhorred me. As I now review other sites of memorialization we saw in Warsaw, many commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, I will attempt to voice the observations I made as a Public Historian and the feelings I experienced as a foreign observer.

When reports of the mass murder of Jews at Treblinka leaked back to the Warsaw ghettos, a surviving group of mostly young people formed an organization called the ZOB (for the Polish name, Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, which means Jewish Fighting Organization). The ZOB, led by 23-year-old Mordecai Anielewicz, issued a proclamation calling for the Jewish people to resist going to the railroad cars. In January 1943, Warsaw ghetto fighters fired upon

German troops as they tried to round up another group of ghetto inhabitants for deportation, using a small supply of weapons that had been smuggled into the ghetto. After a few days, the troops retreated. This small victory inspired the ghetto fighters to prepare for future resistance. On April 19, 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began after German troops and police entered the ghetto to deport its surviving residents. Seven hundred and fifty fighters fought the heavily armed and well-trained Germans, resisting defeat longer than the entire country of Poland had in September 1941. The ghetto fighters were able to hold out for nearly a month, but on May 16, 1943, the revolt ended. The Germans had slowly crushed the resistance. Of the more than 56,000 Jews captured, about 7,000 were shot, and remainders were deported to killing centers or concentration camps. I wondered how this heroic and yet tragic episode in Holocaust History was viewed by the Polish population in general.

It was not too surprising to learn that the first WWII Memorial built in Warsaw in 1946 commemorated the 3rd anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising. The memorial by Lean Marek Suzin marks the spot where the armed confrontation began and faces what was once a gate into the ghetto. A red sandstone disk tilts forward, facing the now nonexistent gate through which German tanks tried to enter the ghetto. Over the ensuing years of urban renewal, this original meaning of the site has been lost. Today erroneous interpretations claim, among other things, that its form was fashioned after the sewer entrance used by ghetto fighters to escape the ghetto. I quickly understood that this kind of loss of meaning and interpretive distortion of a memorial is the fate all sites of commemoration face when several generations pass and urban legends begin to have more place in the public consciousness than the actual history itself. Questions hung in the air for me of how one best preserves historical meaning at a site of commemoration, as well

as how to revive the historical accuracy of a site that has been subjected to years of unchallenged erroneous promotion. With these lingering thoughts, we explored more sites in Warsaw.

As our guide brought us around a corner, I immediately recognized the most famous of all Warsaw ghetto memorials – the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, designed by Nathan Rapoport. Our guide rehearsed his well-learned script. The monument was first unveiled on April 19, 1948, in Warsaw, Poland. The central bronze panel depicts the men, women and children of the ghetto bearing arms in front of a backdrop of the burning ghetto. Mordechai Anielewicz, the leader of the revolt, stands heroically in the center of other figures to ignite the spirit of rebellion with the torch he clutches in his left hand. The stone used in this memorial was originally quarried for a Nazi victory monument. It has become the recognized icon of memorialization to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, dwarfing all others. Its inscription, “The Jewish Nation – to its fighters and martyrs,” distinctly sends the message to me that the resistance and struggle are what one should remember from the story of the ghetto, not the victimization and mass destruction of hundreds of thousands of ghetto sufferers. I walked around the structure several times, realizing that this magnificent monument held no power to link me to the true human story of desperation that I felt must have been at the heart of the ghetto uprising. This monument’s approach had relegated mass murder to a secondary role ~ what I realized then was a minimized *Polish* role as accused Nazi collaborators.

Another memorial in Warsaw, at 18 Mila Street, marks the approximate site where Mordechai Anielewicz and the Jewish Fighter's Organization's command members committed mass suicide rather than be captured by the Nazis. A memorial mound created on the site with a granite stele placed on it marks the level of the wartime rubble in the ghetto. The English reads:

Grave of the Fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising built from the rubble of Mila Street, one of the liveliest streets of pre-war Jewish Warsaw. These ruins of

the bunker at 18 Mila Street are the place of rest of the commanders and fighters of the Jewish Combat Organization as well as some civilians. Among them lies Mordechai Anielewicz, the commander in chief on May 18, 1943, surrounded by the Nazis after three weeks of struggle, many perished or took their own lives, refusing to perish at the hands of their enemies. There were several hundred bunkers built in the Ghetto, found and destroyed by the Nazis. They became graves. They could not save those who sought refuge inside them, yet they remain everlasting symbols of the Warsaw Jews' will to live. The bunker at Mila Street was the largest in the ghetto. It is the place of rest of over one hundred fighters, only some of whom are known by name. Here they rest, buried where they fell, to remind us that the whole earth is their grave.

As I read the end of the epitaph, realizing I was standing on their graves, chilling sensations began to stir in me – until I heard the words of our guide telling us how this site was now a favorite spot for snow sledders in the winter. Polish citizens of the neighborhood, old and young alike, oblivious to the solemn nature of the site, even though at the bottom of the steps, a marker in four languages, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and English, attests to its history, have redefined the site as a place for winter recreation. But with the marker under snow in the winter, who reads it? Even in July, the mental picture of happy, laughing, frolicking winter enthusiasts sledding down the incline of this memorial grave site gave me a different kind of chill. Other sites of Holocaust memorialization low on the mental radar of the city's citizens abound in Warsaw – too many for me to itemize further. Our experiences in Warsaw ended all too soon and it was time to journey to Krakow and Auschwitz.

Auschwitz has come to be recognized as the symbol of the Holocaust - the largest and most deadly of all 7000+ camps throughout Europe. As we continued with our itinerary, the prospect of actually seeing Auschwitz loomed larger than life for me. Majdanek had been so emotionally draining – I wondered how I would ever get through Auschwitz. Little did I know how completely different my experiences at Auschwitz would be. But first let me set the historical stage. The Nazis opened Auschwitz in 1940 on the outskirts of the Polish city of

Oswiecim, which came under German occupation during WWII. The Germans changed the name of the city to "Auschwitz," and this also became the name of the camp. Over the following years, the camp expanded until it comprised three main parts: Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and Auschwitz III-Monowitz, along with its forty sub-camps. At first a place of imprisonment for the Poles and then Soviet POWs, beginning in 1942 the camp became the scene of the largest mass murder in human history, committed against the Jews deported to Auschwitz. It is estimated that the Nazis sent 1.3 million victims to Auschwitz, with at least 1.1 million of them being Jews from all over Nazi occupied Europe, who were then mercilessly murdered. In an effort to remove the evidence of their crimes, the SS began demolishing the gas chambers and the crematoria at Birkenau, along with other buildings at the end of the war, also burning the records. Nazis then evacuated prisoners capable of walking into the heart of the Third Reich, with many of them dying on these forced death marches. Soviet Army soldiers liberated the remaining Auschwitz prisoners, around 7,000, in January 1945. When we first arrived at Auschwitz, I was completely thrown off balance by the site that greeted my eyes,

Was this Auschwitz or Disneyland? The parking lot was filled with rows and rows of vehicles and buses, tourists of every nationality with thousands of dollars worth of digital camera equipment hung from their necks – mine as well, I might add. I had never imagined I would see so many people there, especially since our visits to Majdanek and Belzec, and even our visits to sites in Warsaw, had been so devoid of people. This was like – Sea World at San Diego in the summer. Not liking crowds of people to begin with, I consciously worked at exercising my patience as we stood in amusement park-like lines waiting to buy a ticket to enter. Visitors were then assembled in groups of about twenty with an Auschwitz tour guide at the lead of each group. As we approached the entrance to the “park,” our group was just one of six gathered

around the perimeter of the entrance gate, listening to the opening dialog of our guides. Always standing on the outskirts of our group, as this gave me a better vantage point for taking pictures, I could hear several rehearsed scripts being spoken simultaneously, giving an echo effect as one spoken dialog followed another with nearly the same exact text.

Wherever we went, there were always crowds of people – it was nearly impossible to elude them. Another irony of the moment escaped me as I dealt with trying to avoid the crowds – the fact that the average number of prisoners at Auschwitz fluctuated between 13 -16,000, reaching 20,000 at one stage in 1942. Perhaps I should have been grateful that I was viewing it with crowds of people, instead of empty and barren. My first impression on seeing the massive, two storied red brick buildings was that it looked like an Ivy League College campus during Spring Quarter. The initial thought abhorred me that I could see any kind of beauty in a place whose history spoke of such bestial brutality. This camp known as Auschwitz I initially comprised twenty buildings: fourteen at ground level and six with an upper floor. During the period from 1941 to 1942 an extra storey was added to all ground-floor buildings and eight new blocks were constructed. Altogether the camp contained twenty eight two-story buildings that had served as prisoner barracks.

Several months after the war, a group of Polish prisoners, who had survived Auschwitz, began communicating the idea of commemorating the victims of this largest of the death camps. In April 1946, a group of Polish survivors arrived at the site of the camp with the intention of opening a museum. Thousands of visitors even then had begun arriving on a mass scale to search for traces of relatives or to pay homage to those who had been murdered. Survivors began acting as unofficial docents to these modern day pilgrims. On July 2, 1947 the Polish Parliament passed a law securing the grounds and buildings of Auschwitz as a place of international martyrdom and

calling into being the Oswiecim-Brzezinka State Museum for this purpose. The museum's mission was to secure the grounds and buildings of the camp, and to collect and gather evidence and material related to the Nazi crimes so that they could be studied and made accessible to the public. There are 154 original camp buildings of various sorts in the museum and memorial, 56 at Auschwitz I and 98 at Birkenau. These include prisoner blocks and barracks, administration buildings, SS guardhouses, guard towers, and the camp gates. There are also 300 ruins, including the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau, camp fences, paved roads, and train tracks. Thousands of objects belonging to the camp inmates were found at the site, including suitcases, Jewish prayer garments, artificial limbs, eyeglasses, shoes, and human hair. These objects make up a basic part of the museum holdings and are on display in the exhibit rooms, housed in the brick barracks of Auschwitz I. Also on exhibit are hundreds of smaller items, such as umbrellas, combs, shaving brushes, toothbrushes, etc. The Museum encompasses 6,000 exhibits, including 2,000 works of art done in the camp by prisoners, often illegally, as well as other works of art produced after the war. The archives contain a vast collection of Nazi documents, as well as material from the prisoner resistance movement, postwar accounts, memoirs, depositions, films, and the like. Auschwitz is huge on many levels.

In addition to preservation work, the museum carries out scholarly research, organizes exhibits, issues its own publications, organizes lectures, conferences, seminars, and symposia for teachers and students, and offers postgraduate course work for education on totalitarianism, Nazism, and the Holocaust. But the most popular education is carried out among the visitors to the Auschwitz Memorial. An average of 1/2 million people visit Auschwitz every year. This is the most recognized venue and the most publicly witnessed legacy of the Holocaust, therefore it has the greatest impact on the manner in which Holocaust memory will be held in perpetuity.

And realizing that, especially as I observed scores of visitors that day I was there, I have had occasion to question just what that projected memory really is. As the methodology of memorialization advances, both in theory and in practice, Auschwitz continues to generate not only admiration for its preservation work, but criticism for its manner and message of commemoration. Produced for mass public appeal, it is often times seen as fulfilling a tourist appeal at the expense of historical analysis. My personal observations are a mere drop in that bucket.

I took every opportunity I could to walk around the grounds freely, and to extricate myself from the masses when viewing the material holdings in the converted barracks. The prisoner blocks that once held thousands of inmates, now house thousands of exhibits instead, the only tangible evidence of the lives that were lost. One particularly long hallway displayed hundreds of portraits of camp inmates, men photographed in their striped uniforms during registration, faces from a different time, staring out into ours. After 1943, the photographs were superseded by camp numbers tattooed on prisoners' left forearms. None of the prisoners in those photographs survived. The displays of material objects, once possessions of the victims, are probably the most disturbing of all the exhibits at Auschwitz. I really battled with myself about taking photographs at the exhibits. At first we were told we could not take pictures of the displays inside the barracks, and I respected that directive completely. That took the decision out of my hands. But as our tour progressed, and we butted up behind other tour groups taking scores of pictures, I inquired again about their policy. "Well, yes," was the reply, "if it is important it is all right." Who decides when it is important or not? That put the moral decision to photo or not to photo right back in my lap. So I took a picture of one of the lesser innocuous displays, the

mangled pile of eyeglasses. Other displays, such as the heaped up masses of human hair, seemed too personal and too horrific to photograph.

One of my more distasteful experiences at Auschwitz occurred between blocks 10 and 11, in the courtyard of the Death Wall, also called the Black Wall. It was here that the SS shot several thousand prisoners between 1941 and 1943. High walls enclosed the courtyard on two sides. Wooden blinds on the windows facing the courtyard prevented observation of the executions. I wanted to take a picture of the empty courtyard and had to wait a very long time before I could, as other visitors were taking photographs of each other standing in front of the execution wall. This was so troubling and distasteful to me, that I could barely contain myself from speaking out. I began to understand why some survivors have disapproved of the efforts for memorialization at Auschwitz due to the distasteful "touristy" feeling that has emerged. Therefore I was startled when another visitor to Auschwitz objected to me and my demeanor at a different site.

We had entered the one-time ammunitions bunker that housed the first crematorium of Auschwitz, Crematorium I, situated just outside the main fence of the camp. The furnaces had operated from August 1940 until July 1943. Crematorium I was first used to burn the bodies of victims who had died from torture, starvation, execution, exhaustion, or any other number of ways in which inmates died. The first operations for the mass murder of Jews was not carried out here until early 1942, when the morgue of Crematorium I had been converted into a gas chamber. After the opening of the larger facility at Birkenau, exterminations at this site gradually ended. As we came to the furnace ovens, I waited until people had cleared the area and as I was setting my camera to take a picture, an older gentleman became highly agitated with me and the other guests who were all taking pictures of the furnaces, and he started to bat away at our

cameras. Not wanting to offend him further, I took no other pictures in his company. To him, our presence was a violation of the site and I understood and respected his objection. I was conflicted over my role in being there, which I viewed as an educator hoping to use the materials and photographs I was collecting in the advancement of Holocaust memorialization theory and methodology for future generations. However, my presence and actions were an affront to this gentleman who obviously had significant ties to the actual events that had transpired there. How does a public historian find a balance between the two? No longer annoyed with the crowds, I turned all my pent-up aggravations on myself.

When I eventually exited the camp I felt frustration and disappointment with my visit. I had failed to make any kind of personal connection at Auschwitz. In fact, I had even offended another. I have thought about this a great deal since my return home. I was an outsider, a visitor, even an interloper, who spent four meager hours trying to comprehend the lifetime experiences of tortured and murdered victims of unimaginable cruelty. What a ridiculous idea that was to even think that I could do such a thing. At first, I tried to blame it on the scripted, overly dramatized voice of our tour guide interfering with my own private moments of contemplation. But that wasn't it. I even blamed the "touristy" demeanor of some of the visitors as having distracted me. But that wasn't it either. Then one day I was scanning through my photographs and one image at Auschwitz struck me like no other – it was a picture of the electrically charged guard fences of the camp perimeter. But in this view I was looking through multiple layers of chain-linked fencing, obstructing the focus, and I realized that was how I felt about Auschwitz. I tried to look in and to see it clearly, but my vision was obscured by layers of metaphorical fencing that blocked my view – fences of time, fences of experience, and fences of distance. And I learned and accepted that those fences that impeded my connection to Auschwitz would always

be there, in essence as a guarding barrier for humanity – guarding survivors and visitors alike, protecting all against the unending barbs of Auschwitz’s complete inhumanity.

But Auschwitz wasn’t the end of my Holocaust travels – there was so much more to come and over the next few weeks I made a very important observation – that no matter how jaded I sometimes felt, I never knew when that one picture, or one story, or one object would connect with me on a deeper level and push me over the edge of my growing indifference, slamming me with horrible awareness. My European pilgrimage, formulated for the express purpose of helping me feel qualified to enter the field of Holocaust studies as a legitimate professional, saturated me beyond my ability to absorb. Places and objects that I had previously thought would be unbearable to witness seemed to have little effect on me as my tours progressed. I was tired. No, more than that, I was exhausted. After touring Mauthausen, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, and Neuengamme, it all began to be one big blur. When I came to Hamburg, the last week of my month-long venture, I had one last visit to make – to the neighborhood where Cantor Cysner had lived when he was deported in the *Polenaktion* of October 1938.

Once I had found his tax record at the Staatsarchiv in Hamburg, I now had his actual address in my hand. I purchased a detailed street map of Hamburg, determined the best street car route, and found Isestrasse. At first, I only found those properties whose house numbers were above 100. I could not see where the lower numbers resumed. While seated at a restaurant on the corner where the higher numbers ended, I glanced across the street and saw an avenue hidden by low hanging trees and the overhead rails. Once I crossed over the intersection I found an entire neighborhood once hidden from view. I walked and took many pictures of the area, including several of Cantor Cysner's address at #65 Isestrasse. As I went up and down the long boulevard of multi-storied apartment complexes, not wanting to leave the area where he had lived, I read

the golden glowing surfaces of the Stolpersteine that had been mortared into the walkways. The Stolpersteine Project is the creation of sculptor Gunter Demnig of Cologne, Germany. Born in Berlin in 1947, Demnig has studied and practiced his artistic craft throughout Germany his entire life. The conceptualization of his personal commemoration project to the victims of Nazism came about in 1993 and he set his first memorial “Stumbling Blocks” in Berlin in 1997. Crafted by him personally, Demnig’s Stolpersteine are bronze plaques, each stamped with the name of a Holocaust victim under the phrase “Here lived . . .” Also etched into the metal is the birth date of the victim, when known, when and where they were deported, and when and where they died. These plaques are then set into the mortar of the sidewalk in front of the residence where the victim last lived. In this manner, Demnig has sought to preserve a memory of every known victim of Nazi Fascism, whether Jew, intellectual, political prisoner, Gypsy, Jehovah Witness, or Homosexual. Thousands of these Stolpersteine have been set into the sidewalks in Hamburg, Berlin, Bonn, Bremen, Essen, Frankfurt, just to name a few of the German cities embracing this program.

In front of nearly every apartment complex on Isestrasse, set into the walkways in front of the entrances, were several of these shining plaques. I tried to read them all, especially those in front of the address where Cantor Cysner had lived when he was deported to Zbaszyn. All these names, and yet they really were so few in the overall numbers of the victims of Germany’s fascist leaders. I watched as people walked along the sidewalks, noticing that no one else looked down to read the plaques except me. But as I looked back along the walkway, the setting sun glinted off the bronze stones and it was impossible not to notice them. Each radiant, glowing stone bearing the name of one remembered victim and in that moment, in that one seemingly inconsequential moment, it all came into a piercingly sharp brilliant focus, imbedding itself into

my psyche forever – I was not supposed to understand the enormity of the Holocaust. Such a quest was an exercise in eternal futility. I was there to understand the enormity of just the one holocaust – the lost life and experiences of Cantor Joseph Cysner. I was there for him, not for me. I was there to connect with his past so that I could restore his lost life to his family and to his congregants, and to the larger field of Holocaust studies in general. When I accomplish that, my quest will be complete and his life will have qualified me to enter the scholarly world as a Holocaust historian, with my humanity intact after all.