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Remembering the Holocaust

Vivien Marcow Speiser

Phillip Speiser

An Arts-Based Inquiry

This article describes our process of doing arts-based research as a search for meaning making around the losses our families suffered in the holocaust. As expressive arts therapists and educators we used the arts as a method for exploring painful emotions, documenting our journey into Poland and as a means for sharing our experience/findings with others. The final form of our research has taken the shape of a multimedia dance performance piece. As performers and educators we have shown this piece for the past 14 years, in courses for therapists and educators, at Holocaust remembrance events, across the United States, in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

We will describe our methodology as well as present some of our findings through words and images. In 1990 we made a trip to Poland to explore the towns that Phillip's family had lived in before and during World War II. We also planned to do some teaching at the University of Warsaw so that we could learn more about the culture and to keep the trip from being entirely personal. We knew that we intended to visit some of the concentration camps in Poland, particularly Auschwitz-Birkenau where we had both lost family members. As co-investigators we decided that we would process our feelings and experiences along the way as they came up in the moment. We both kept journals where we wrote about our experiences and created documentation through photographs and recorded interviews with people we met along the way. At that time we had no clear thoughts or ideas about what, if anything, we would do with the information we were gathering.

In many ways we had both been investigating the holocaust all of our lives. As children we were both aware of the Holocaust and its impact upon our families. Throughout our lives we have both read extensively about the holocaust, and have visited holocaust museums and memorials throughout the world. In our somewhat extensive traveling we have always investigated the Jewish life of every country we are in and have examined the life of that culture both prior to and after the Second World War. Both of us have worked as expressive arts therapists with Holocaust survivors and have investigated the effects of the Holocaust upon the next generation of family members.

When we traveled to Poland we knew that we would be grappling with issues around Jewish identity and family history in an attempt to make sense out of non- sense. This

trip was our way of honoring our Hirschowitz, Schabaschewitz, Speiser, and Stybel family members who perished in the Holocaust. We knew it would be painful to enter into the territory of what we thought of as “the enemy” and it was. Phillip's parents were afraid for us and clammed up in terms of giving us helpful clues to guide us in our search. We found ourselves in an emotional terrain where from moment to moment we would suddenly plunge into dark feeling states as we encountered remnants of Jewish experience in Poland. We had also heard many stories about anti-semitism in Poland so we were always on our guard. The questions we traveled with included: uncertainty about whether we would find the homes Phillip's families had lived in; whether it was safe for us to travel about as Jews; and questions about what sorts of tangible signs we would discover about Jewish life in Poland in the past and in the present. We traveled by ferry across the Baltic Sea from Sweden and brought Phillip's Saab across to drive around the country in. We were pretty much playing it by ear, each day unfolding as we followed our quest. We did not speak Polish and we rarely had translation available to us.

Traveling through Poland was an emotional roller coaster ride. Our attempt to retain some sort of professional distance by teaching students at the University of Warsaw is a case in point. We were shown to a guest apartment inside the Department of Psychology building where we were to be living and teaching. At that moment we both experienced an unexplainable painful visceral reaction. Both of us felt suffocated and we could not stay there. Later we learned that the building we were in was the former Gestapo headquarters for the Warsaw Ghetto and across the road from the building stood the station where the Jews had been deported to the concentration camps--so much for “professional” distance.

We succeeded in finding the towns that Phillip's families had lived in and managed to find the actual house that Phillip's father had grown up in and helped to build--all this happening with a small scrap of paper that had written on it in Polish: “Do you know the family Speiser from the 1930's?” Despite the lack of translation we managed to create a non-verbal relationship with the three generations of family who currently lived in the house and were touched by their hospitality and obvious warmth. Later we learned that this family was indeed very good friends with Phillip's family before the war. We did not experience the anti-semitism we had expected to find.

We learned quickly how to find our bearings in every town we traveled through by asking where the Jewish cemetery was to be found. These cemeteries usually had lost most of their tombstones which the Nazi's had desecrated, often to build roads with. Sometimes these tombstones had been hidden and resurrected following the war. Sometimes we would see candles or stones at the sides of the graves, which indicated that they had recently been visited. It was profoundly moving to walk through these graveyards and to see so many centuries of Jewish life lived in Poland, stretching back

for centuries. We were often in tears, and would frequently bump into people making similar pilgrimages in search of their own roots. It was a chilling, humbling and profound honor to be undertaking this task of remembrance.

The most profound moment of our experience was visiting the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. We had dramatically different responses to the camp. Vivien sank into the ashes, as Phillip felt compelled to keep moving and explore and photograph. In the performance piece that we later crafted out of this experience we recapitulate our process in the camp and transform it into an artistic multimedia piece.

When we set out on our trip into Poland we knew that we needed to document our journey. We did this in the form of journal writing, audio recordings of individuals we found who knew Phillip's family and photography. We did not think of ourselves as arts-based researchers. After returning home we realized that we needed to find a way to keep this journey alive and fresh. It is here that we turned to artistic inquiry to help us find a form for remembering the holocaust and its impact upon our lives. Our attempt to find meaning, in this case to become the keeper of the stories and share these with others, slowly emerged. This is what crystallized from our research. We began an intensive period of reading, attending classes and events related to holocaust studies and became involved in a project that was recording interviews with holocaust survivors. We also recorded the histories of the survivors in our own families.

It is during this period that we continued to shape our raw data from our journey into various artistic forms. We created a photo essay, part of which will be presented at the conclusion of this article. We also created a slide presentation where we share our stories through the form of storytelling. Lastly, in a 7-minute performance piece entitled "I am alive in this place of death", Phillip accompanies Vivien on the flute as she moves to seven slides that were taken inside the death camp Birkenau. This multimedia dance performance projects the slide images off of the back of Vivien and onto a screen. The effect is hauntingly eerie as the image of Vivien moving collides with images of Vivien in the concentration camp and near the ovens of death.

We use our exploration and findings as an arts-based teaching methodology which demonstrates a research process in action. Our goal is to serve as role models who demonstrate how others can make art out of their own life experiences. We have evoked a powerful response to our work. Audiences are often left in tears, stunned, speechless. In the question and discussion period following the performance people find their own connections and often talk about their own heritage, their own losses and their desire to preserve connection to that. The work remains vivid and alive for us as we continue to interact with others around it.

We did not know that this research would be woven into our teaching and that 14 years later we would still be the keepers of this story. We have learned that this story impacts powerfully on others, that it has stood the test of time, and that we are still learning from it. This story is linked to our sense of mission, agency and efficacy in this world and it is our way of making sure that we do not forget. We are not yet done with this inquiry and probably never will.

In the same way that we take the audience inside of our felt experience through stories, images, music and movement, when we teach and perform this work, we use words and images to capture and express what continues to live within us in relationship to this work. We consider this to be an integral part of who we are and haven't taken upon ourselves this task of sacred remembrance.

For the remainder of this article, we will present a portion of the "data" of our research findings through the photo-essay that we created. We hope that these words and images "speak" to you, our readers.

Our Personal Backgrounds

Vivien:

I grew up in South Africa in the fifties. My grandparents had immigrated to South Africa to escape pogroms in Lithuania and my parents were born there. As fervent Zionists, my parents immigrated to fight in Israel's war of independence in 1948 and I was most likely conceived on an illegal immigrant ship. My personal myth was fashioned out of this experience where in utero I was present in Israel during this war but because I needed to be born by Caesarian section, my parents returned to South Africa shortly before I was born.

As a child, I experienced anti-semitism early in grade school. At the same time I was one of those children who were fascinated by the holocaust and I read voraciously anything holocaust related I could lay hands on. In the Jewish community, Israel's day of independence was celebrated and before this celebration I remember watching vivid and graphic movies about the holocaust, which haunt me to this day. In the way that children tend to merge events, I tended to merge the holocaust with the founding of the state of Israel, and since I had almost been born there, with my birth. Thus I became intrinsically connected to the holocaust (at least in my own mind). I did not know as a child that my grandfather's entire family had been left behind in Lithuania and that apart from one cousin who survived, the rest of the family perished, primarily in Auschwitz. As is common in survivor families this knowledge had been buried and did not surface until I was an adult, living in Israel, at the time.

Phillip:

I grew up in New York City in the Bronx and in Brooklyn and was surrounded by Jews and the experience of being Jewish. I knew that my parents had immigrated to the United States from Poland and that my mother's family had escaped the Holocaust by moving across the border into Russia at the outbreak of the war. I knew that my father had left Poland on his own as a young man where he met up with my mother's family and eventually married my mother. I also knew that my paternal grandparents and the rest of the extended family had died in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

All my life I had heard stories about the war, and the heroic acts my father performed to stay alive, such as being sent to a work camp in Siberia and later escaping. I did not notice that every year on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, remembrance candles burned to honor my father's family who had died. This I only discovered as an adult.

My mother's family and my parents survived the holocaust by escaping into Russia where they endured the war. After the war they passed through Poland again, on their way to Germany where they were interned in an American refugee camp for several years. From here they immigrated to the USA, where I was born. One of my older brothers was born in the displaced person's camp in Germany. My parents did not return again to Poland and were fearful about the trip I eventually made. As an adult I immigrated to Sweden for a twelve-year period. Since Poland was only a ferry ride away on the Baltic Sea, I had always thought that I would make the trip across when the time was right.

Selected Field Notes from our Trip to Poland**TEACHING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW**

As we approached the University, where we were to stay in a guest apartment, we became very apprehensive. We had already been in the country for several days and had been finding our feet. We tended to verge in and out of a consciousness that we were Jews, visiting a country where Jews had been persecuted. As our perfectly charming hosts led us into the guest apartment, Vivien experienced a deep visceral terror and we both felt that we could not breathe and needed to leave the space. When we returned to teach in that same building the next day we discovered that the department of psychology was housed in what had been the former Gestapo headquarters for the Warsaw Ghetto. We declined an invitation to visit the basement where the prisoners had been tortured and could not practice emotional detachment in regard to these experiences.

Notes from Phillip's Journal:

“Familiar faces, familiar spaces, familiar places? You, students, were to be a buffer between the past and the present- a safety valve and reality check so that I would not sink totally into my parent's past. So naïve I am. So naïve are you. You listen to me, a Jew, with open curiosity. You move with freedom and grace. The work is full of wonder. And yet we all remain trapped in this hell- the former Gestapo Headquarters for the Warsaw ghetto.”

Visiting Aunt Reiber's House

Since we were new to investigating in this manner we tended to invent strategies as we went along. We had already discovered that outside of the university, not too many people spoke English and when we explored the rural towns Phillip's mother had lived in we were much at a disadvantage. Learning from experience, when we visited the town of Rzeszow we took the porter of the hotel along with us on our search. He was an older gentleman who knew that we wanted to visit the Jewish areas of the town. He did not understand or speak English but knew what we were looking for (i.e. the location of what had once been the Jewish Ghetto). We had the address of Phillip's father's aunt's house, and because this house had stood at the outskirts of the Jewish Ghetto, we found that actual house which was undergoing renovation.

Notes from Phillip's Journal:

“I am walking on the streets that you, Dad, walked as a child. They are repairing the very same house that you lived in as a child in order to go to the better elementary school. I am excited. I want to rejoice over having found the building. And yet, at the same time, I am torn and filled with tears. Aunt Reiber is gone and so are all of your other aunts, uncles, and grandparents. So are your parents, Moses and Perla, as well as your sister Miriam. Gone. Gone to Ash.”

Finding Phillip's Father's House

By now we were becoming more proficient field researchers and we set out to find the village of Phillip's father armed to the tooth with a piece of paper which asked, in Polish, “Do you know the family Speiser from the 1930's?”

The first man we came up to in the village, who looked older and would thus remember, nodded his head, but his bus came so he had to leave. The next man we approached knew the family and led us there directly, pointing out the houses that Jewish families had lived in on the way. Like before, the exultation in reaching our destination was bittersweet, suffused with pain, suffering and loss.

Notes from Phillip's Journal:

“This tearing feeling inside of me will not leave. I want to rejoice. I want to celebrate. And yet, I don't even know who these people are, living in your home. Are they part of the family that tried to kill you when you returned from the war? Is this the water that you Dad fell into as a child? It's 50 feet from your house, just where you said it would be. Is it the same water that your neighbor threw all of your parent's belongings into? You told me about how your father had to fight to get his valuables returned, just before they were sent off to the ghetto.”

Visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau

Towards the end of the trip we visited Auschwitz –Birkenau that in many ways was the culminating crucible of the personal quest to research and understand the ways in which the holocaust had impacted upon our lives. We had visited other camps whilst in Poland but this was the camp where we had both personally lost family members. We will present some of the data we discovered in images and words and call upon our readers to enter into their own dialogic responses to our discoveries.

Notes from Phillip's Journal:

“This is the last stop! There are no other stops. There are no other stations. My body is no longer torn--no longer trying to allow a moment of joy to exist. There are only memories of pain and death screaming at me to be heard and seen--memories that I hear and see although I have never been here before. I have come to rest in Birkenau, Jewish Death Camp number 2 at Auschwitz.

The tracks never seem to end. I walk on through eternity and experience the endlessness of time. It is as if history is repeating itself, life repeating itself, generations repeating themselves.

I have you Vivien to walk with. I am frightened. Let us not be separated.”

Notes from Vivien's Journal:

“I stand in that field in Birkenau
It is a warm spring day
I can hear the birds
And the sounds of the tractor
In the adjacent fields.
I can see the ovens of the crematoria
Stretching as far as
My eyes and my mind can see

I cannot approach the crematoria or ovens of death
I can enter the barracks where the inmates lived.
I am living in the shadow of the inmates

You are still exploring
You climb up another guard's tower
By now they have me
I am totally in their power
We are still in the avenue
Between the camp of life
And the camp of death.
I can smell death in the air still
The air over Poland is still death
I can see the ashes all around me
In this avenue of death.

I still hear the birds
And the sounds of the tractor.
I start moving out.
You are in front of me
The grass is tall all around us and I can hear the sounds
We make as we walk through.
By now I am terrified.
I want to run back,

I go back to the guard's tower
And in a rush of fury I break off a piece of wood.
You tell me "If everybody did that there wouldn't
Be a way to remember."
I take your picture inside the guard's tower.
I cannot go inside
I cannot stand where the guards had stood.

I am feeling numb
My defenses kick in and block out all feeling.
We walk into the compound
You continue exploring the insides of barracks.
I lie in the field with the ancestors
On the ashes of my people, my people,
The great-grandparents, the great-aunts and great-uncles and second cousins
I will never know.

I see a steady stream of Jewish faces just like mine
Who were killed just because they were Jewish

I remember when I was a child
I would wonder how people survived the camps
I begin to understand the way I might have survived
If I had survived at all
And I realize that what might have happened to me comes not
From that place of courage in me that I had imagined
But from an absolute indifference to
Whether I lived or not

Yet
I am alive in this place of death
Still alive in the warm afternoon sun
Still alive so that I can tell this story

Conclusion

It is now 14 years since we made our journey into Poland and began an intensive, ongoing artistic inquiry to preserve and share this experience. We went into this journey with some vague and undefined feelings of both anxiety and excitement, without expectation of where we would be heading in terms of the outcome of our research. We did not know then that we would be working on a performance piece. We did not know then that we would integrate this journey into our teaching. What we have found and continue to find is that this work is central to the work we do in this world. It lives inside of us and each time we present the work it is as if we are instruments for the work performing itself. It is clear that the piece has stood the test of time and it feels as relevant now as it did then. In many ways our mission has become clearer.

We are the keepers of this story and telling the story has become central to our mission in this life. Our project affirms how the arts are uniquely suited for integrating these complex and unplanned experiences, deepening our understanding of their significance, and providing us with the vehicles for communicating the outcomes that continue to emerge from our inquiry. Given our family histories, we have undertaken this task of sacred remembrance and we give thanks that we are alive in this time and able to make this offering. Each time we share this offering with others we are reminded that our testimony is itself an affirmation both of the continued existence of our people as well as the transformative power of the arts. We celebrate life itself as we share this work with others and integrate the feedback we receive into the next telling.