

The Silent Yizkor

YOM KIPPUR DAY in October 1945, I spent in the Displaced Persons camp in Landsberg, Bavaria. The Jews who had been imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp and those who had worked in ammunition and other factories in the area were gathered either in this camp or at Feldafing, also in Bavaria. With them were many others whom the Germans had marched from more distant concentration camps to this part of Germany, where the American army freed them.

In Landsberg there were spacious army barracks confiscated by the American army to house some of the liberated Jews. Food and medical care were provided by the army through UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration that was set up with the help of the US Government. The Jews in the camp elected a committee, which assumed responsibility for internal camp administration. Synagogues were organized for the High Holidays, often on the basis of the participants' origins. There was a synagogue for Jews from Poland, another for Hungarian Jews, and another for Lithuanian Jews. Smaller groups, such as Hassidic Jews and those stemming from Máramaros, a region on the border of Romania spilling into Hungary and Slovakia, had their own prayer places too.

I attended morning services that day in the synagogue for Polish Jews. The prayers were charged with emotion, very moving, very painful. Tears welled from the depths of their hearts, mourning those who were lost, murdered in the death camps. It was a congregation of the desperate and lonely. Hardly anyone had a spouse or family member among the

living. The older generation had been the first victims, since the Germans did not see in them future laborers. Children were nowhere to be seen at Landsberg: they had been quickly annihilated so as not to be a burden on the concentration camp administration. The survivors prayed, remembered, and wept, but found little comfort in their tears.

After the morning prayers, I decided to visit other synagogues and spend some time with other groups. I walked across the half-empty streets. Those who were still on the streets were the individuals who refused to attend services. They were angry at God. Among them were formerly religious, observant Jews who could not accept the apparent indifference of God to the suffering, the torture, and the tragedy they witnessed in their homes, in the camps. They could not reconcile their former beliefs and convictions of an all-merciful Almighty Being with the catastrophe that had struck their communities. They would not pray. When they heard the recitation of Kaddish in the synagogues, the mourner's prayer praising the sanctity of the Lord, they would purse their lips in anger, feeling that God did not deserve the prayer. These Jews roamed the streets that day. They wanted to express their anger, to show God that they too could abandon Him, as He had abandoned them. Some of them ate their food publicly on the fast day, as a gesture of defiance – of revolt.

In one of the streets, I saw a large group of people standing in a circle. I approached the cluster to find out what was going on. In the middle of the circle stood a seven-year-old girl, embarrassed, perplexed. She could not understand why all these people stood around her. She, of course, could not know that they were surprised to find a Jewish child, alive. They had not seen Jewish children in the camps. They had not seen Jewish children since liberation. Someone must have come from Eastern Europe and brought this little girl with them. So they stood silently and just gazed at this miracle. They could not tear themselves away from this one child who said nothing and to whom they said nothing. They just stood and stared.

A memorial prayer, Yizkor, is normally recited on Yom Kippur in memory of the departed members of one's family. Now, as these inhabitants of Landsberg DP camp looked at the little girl, they all remembered their own children, their younger brothers and sisters, their nephews and nieces, who had once been their pride and joy and who were no more. Each one of them looked and remembered. Each recalled the beloved children who were cruelly exterminated. And as they remembered, they

Part One: Displaced Persons Camps in Post-War Germany

recited – barely moving their lips – the Yizkor prayer for all those who were part of their lives and were gone forever.

They had no prayer books, no voices were heard, no words were spoken and yet this was a most emotive Yizkor, most moving, most eloquent, most heartfelt; the most silent Yizkor I have ever heard. ✧