

12th EUROPEAN WORKSHOP

On dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence

Invitation to broaden perspectives

11th - 16th of August 2021

Centre for Dialogue and Prayer - Oswiecim, Poland

Daily Diary



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11th of August 2021

12:10 ... Landing at Krakow airport!

How many memories, images and frames pass through my mind in memory of that WYD in 2016! Now, however, there is no longer that air of celebration, of bright joy; the atmosphere is already more serious, austere, harsh ...

I come back in the Polish land, but this time with another destination: Oswiecim-Auschwitz. After the experience of interreligious dialogue in Sarajevo three years ago, I see some familiar faces (Jorg and Paulis) who, in turn, remember me and don't waste time chatting to get updated on my new activities. After all, my commitment to the items of justice and peace have been strengthening right after that occasion.

Many new people from all over the world introduce themselves, united by the same commitment to peace and reconciliation: Albania, Germany, Cameroon, Lithuania, Latvia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Belarus, Poland, Bulgaria and ... Italy! Yes, it is Francesco and me who represent Italy at the 12th international workshop of the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation "On dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence". A foundation that bases its commitment on contributing to reconciliation with humility but with a long perspective, in a time also marked by the COVID pandemic, in which the physical presence of the participants is already a particular sign of unity. A Hungarian writer stated that "*Europe was built on ruins and with ruins*"; Auschwitz is still an open wound, the place of human cruelty, a place of memory with a strong impact on the present.

This will surely be a listening experience: listen to the survivors, to the millions of Jews killed still calling for justice, to one another, in a presence that speaks for itself.



The Center for Dialogue and Prayer that hosts us is "the voice of the Land of Oswiecim", a place of encounter with the most tragic, painful and dramatic episode in history, a place of peace and dialogue or, perhaps, of "silence and listening to the threshold of Auschwitz ", where we want to contribute to the reconstruction of humanity, faith, mutual understanding and courage in solidarity.



Auschwitz is such a reckoning with the conscience of humanity through the tombstones testifying the victims of these peoples, that a person cannot only visit it, but must also think with fear of what has been one of the frontiers of hate, a hate that can be turned, however, into a feeling of reconciliation ...



“ When we are standing here, no matter how different we may be as individuals and as nations, we cannot escape from the longing to recognize one another as brothers”. (John Paul II at Auschwitz-Birkenau 7th of June 1979)

The service as a reader at the morning Eucharistic celebration inspired and prepared the heart and soul for the experience of this day. Hearing, reading or watching on TV documentaries about the concentration and extermination camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau is not the same as “living” them in a guided tour of eight hours in total.

Stories, faces, despair, anguish, cruelty, humiliation, torture, took shape in the narration of this horrible and terrifying page of history. Prisoners selected for the most humiliating and exhausting jobs, conducted to the most extreme hardships; women stripped and mocked in front of unscrupulous and disrespectful agents; shaved men, women and children, classified with a number visibly tattooed on a part of their body to be more easily recognized; living beings object of experiments in the "laboratory of the Nazi hell" of doctor Mengele; corporal punishment, hair and body hair pulling; barbed wire crossed by high voltage; hanging hooks and a shooting wall ready for those trying to breathe a breath of freedom back. Human beings physically and morally deteriorated, deteriorated in their dignity. People who, despite all the suffering, the oppression and the hate gone through by other people who had completely lost their sense of humanity, have kept a glimmer of hope in those conditions.



In Auschwitz, display cases full of objects stolen from the victims (clothes, shoes, combs, brushes, photographs, tools) are evidence of the existence and passage of millions of people deported to the largest concentration camp in Europe, reduced to nothing, no more than scattered ash.



"To the memory of the men, women and children who fell victim to the Nazi genocide. Here lie their ashes. May their souls rest in peace", we can read in the inscription of a gravestone in the Birkenau camp.



Walking through a "sacred" land, walking the same paths as 1,100,000 victims, listening to their suffering for the atrocities they have suffered, is an experience that touches you, shakes you, penetrates you, leaves you breathless and speechless. It leaves you with different feelings and sensations, sometimes even conflicting ones. How not feeling ashamed of so much hatred translated into cruelty? How cannot we have pity for millions of innocent people sentenced, many times a priori, to death with no reason or fault, treated as if they were nothing? Selected to die, to be extinguished, in the gas chambers and then burned in the crematory ovens or even outside.



Birkenau, the immense extermination camp equipped with four crematory ovens burning continuously day and night, looks like an immense expanse of green, which inspires a sense of freedom. But freedom for whom? For us? Certainly not for the hundreds of thousands of people deported daily who have undergone the terrifying and scaring process of selection and starved to wear out slowly. Human beings who, unconsciously and unthinkingly, have "worked" for our freedom, have died for us and for the future of the generations to come.



“For ever let this palce be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women and children, mainly Jews, from various countries of Europe” Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940-1945.

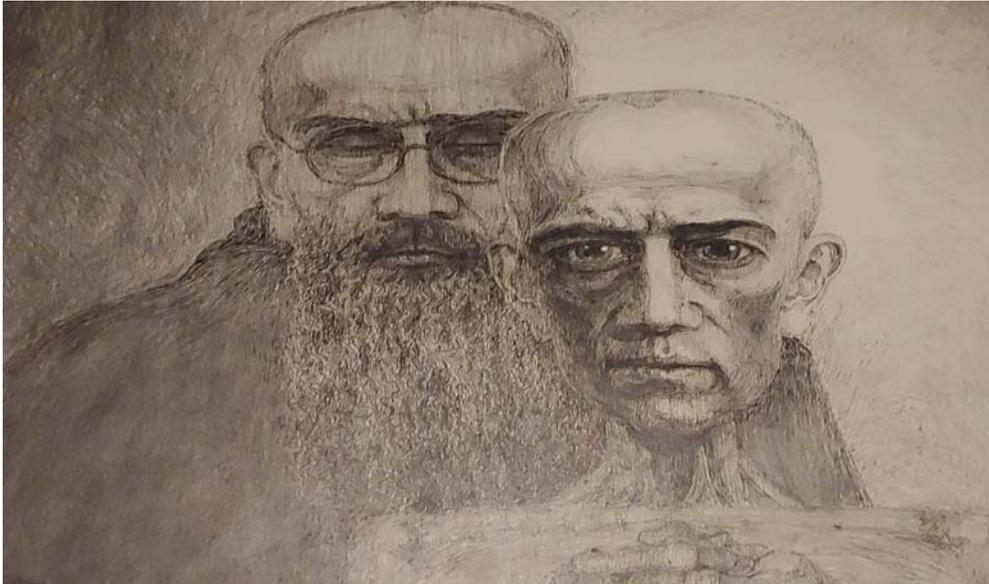
"Dialogue begins with listening".

A day, today, of encounter with memory and witness. Marian Turski and Krystina Budnicka, 95 and 92 years old respectively, shared their personal "miracle of Auschwitz" experience with us participants. Yes, because it is a miracle having survived such a hell. An exhausting struggle in trying to preserve a shred of dignity; to protect a member of your family who, alas, you will never see again; despite everything, to weave bonds between prisoners who, with their own sacrifice, help you to "buy" the pair of glasses you need, because they broke when you fainted after being hit; to see your father, a man respected in society, mocked and made fun of publicly; to live the restrictions of a ghetto that labels you because you have to be visibly different, everyone has to recognize you by that star on your clothes.

"I was there and I saw. I haven't done anything, I'm just alive . "It's a miracle to survive when the perpetrator is strangling you ... It was faith in God that made me survive.



Faith was precisely the light in that dark "community of suffering", the certainty of having a God who does not abandon you in the most terrible and atrocious moments. The artist Marian Kolodzey, who died a few years ago, clearly expressed this concept in his works. His drawings, the means of communication of the artist who replaced the word, lost due to a stroke, which throw out the interiority of prisoner 432, in an exhibition in Harmeze, are the transcription in artistic language of evil, of pain , of the torment of that criminal machine, in which hearing words like "You won't be beaten to death" are felt as consoling and moving.



The sense of community and support for one another, with a constant thought for families and loved ones, was the balm that soothed the constant physical and moral wounds. Marian and Krystyna remained in their Poland and continued to work actively for the defense of human rights, for the protection of orphaned children, in memory of the fellow citizens and the Jewish brothers, because *“we can't remain indifferent”*.



Lives collapsed, tried, destroyed, but with the strength to start over, because we are all human beings, nothing else. *“I believe I survived to witness what happened”*. *“Some things need to be forgotten, but others need to be remembered and recalled to reflect on the pain inflicted”*.

What is the message for young people and future generations?

“Live your life, we can all do something to overcome the evil. May your faith be a warning to you. Have mercy on yourselves, because Auschwitz hasn't come out from the sky”.

“Only those who die in holiness build bridges”.

Today is the day of commemoration of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of his death.



A solemn mass was celebrated in his memory in the church in the center of Oswiecim dedicated to him. Many faithful present, the band complex, the local authorities, to pay homage to their saint. In a certain sense, the moment of communion was very intense and particular: knelt in front of the commemorative marble with the sound of the organ in the background.



At that moment, in front of the painting of the saint above the dedication, several frames peeped into my mind: the visit inside the gas chamber, those frightening ovens, which disintegrated millions of prisoners, scattered ashes without a place of rest. The martyrdom of a Polish Franciscan

who voluntarily offered to take the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek, a family man destined for the hunger bunker of block 11 in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The prisoner n ° 16670 assigned to the transport of corpses, became a corpse himself, killed with a lethal injection of carbolic acid, cremated and his ashes scattered. His rosary and a hair remain, are now deposited in a reliquary in his church.



He died in holiness and, with his martyrdom, he teaches us how to become saints. With the love of God he was able to love until the end, until the moment of reaching out his arm for the lethal injection. A central figure in the field of reconciliation, and there is no reconciliation without truth. After a guided tour of the old Oswiecim Market, the Jewish Center and the Synagogue and the Church of St. Maximilian Kolbe, we opened in plenary a discussion on the fruits and consequences of World War II and Auschwitz in Germany and Poland, and the new prospects for dialogue and reconciliation.

Other points of view about this issue will be discussed tomorrow. Now, it's time to go to bed. Another day and we are moving towards the conclusion of this experience.

"Every religion is peaceful. Our goal is to accept the others".

Different have been the hints for reflection in the "OPEN SPACE" day dedicated to the exchange, the sharing and mutual listening among us participating at the workshop. Comparing the period of World War II in Albania and Latvia contributed to enrich our wealth of knowledge and generate the propensity for dialogue necessary to find common points in a reconciliation in a broader sense. From the personal and community experiences of each one, a tangible unity has emerged at individual, human, heart to heart level, which is not given or helped or nourished by national policies.

A common factor is a certain political disintegration which prevents that unity in diversity which should be the engine of the efforts on reconciliation and interreligious dialogue. What is missing is a "culture of cultures", a knowledge of each other to be able to enter into relationships and behave as "good neighbors". Indeed, we meet people, not political interests translated into money or power.



It is also necessary to free ourselves from preconceptions and stereotypes about other religions, especially those relating to Islam. Very fruitful and constructive it was the comparison with Amina and Kerima, coming from Bosnia Herzegovina, who helped us to know the Muslim perspective on themes such as love, mercy and peace, a comparison on rites, prayers, customs and good practices, in the experiences of each of the group members, of exchange and moments of prayer together.

In a certain sense, it is a matter of bringing together and intertwining different identities, each unique and belonging to its own territory, which, together, can generate new perspectives and look further into the horizon. Reconciliation, in fact, means re-establishing a new relationship, with a different maturity and with that sensitivity that allows wounds to be healed, and pain relieved.



One message is clear and it was strongly expressed by the survivors we met: *“Life is precious; community is precious ... Appreciate life and appreciate community”*.

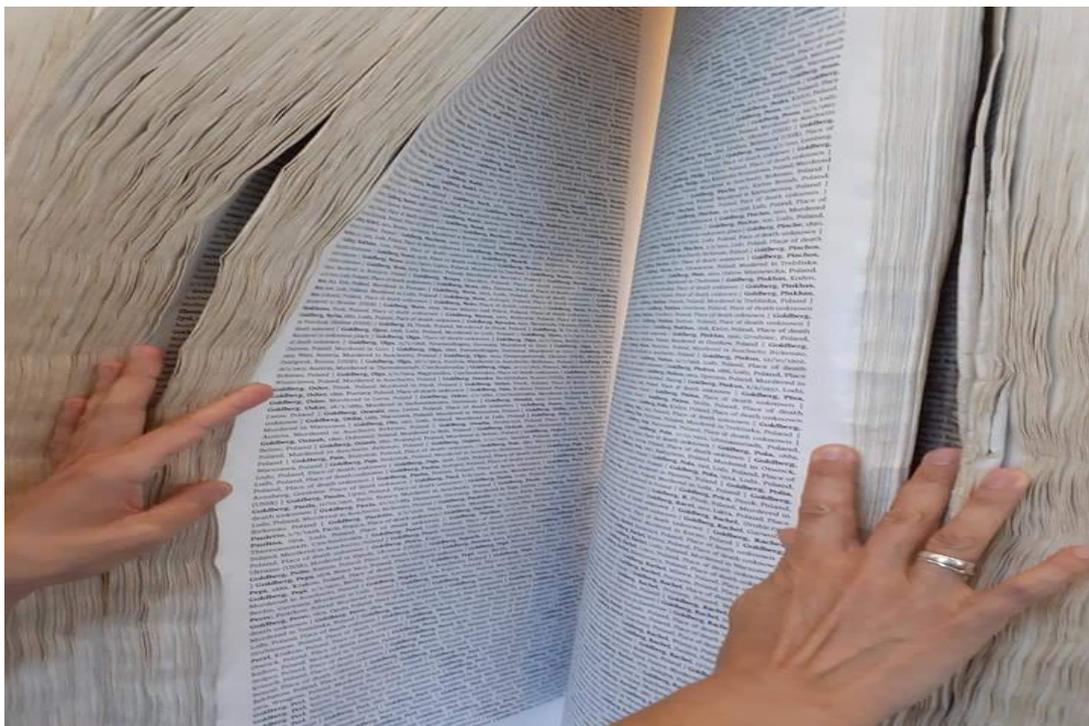


With this positive and hopeful note we can celebrate our experiences together.

“This is a concentration camp ... there is no other way out of here than through the chimney of the crematorium” (The "welcome" of the commander of the camp, Karl Fritzsch, to the new deportees arrived).

The silence of prayer, the mere sound of our footsteps treading the ground, the memory, the reflection and the prayer together, alternated in different languages, marked the 14 stations of the Way of the Cross at the Birkenau extermination camp. The information received, the testimonies heard, the stories read or the documentaries seen on TV began to reappear before my eyes, almost taking shape again to remember the atrocities of that place.

Last step of our experience, before reaching Krakow airport for departure in the afternoon. An experience of community, prayer, memory, future perspectives.



What do I bring with me from this experience?

Emotions, commotion, shame, sorrow ... A “lived” memory, recalled by walking in the places of this tragic chapter of history. A strong bond with faith, the light of hope that accompanied these victims to their last breath.

Believing in Auschwitz means, in fact, constantly looking for the meaning of faith.



I carry with me the sense of friendship, of community, of group, imprinted on the faces and hearts of the other traveling companions, people of other nationalities, of other different cultures who, like me, have challenged Covid-19 to show that distance, despite everything, unites. It has also united me and the brothers from Albania, Romeo and Iulian, also through singing together *Moj and bukura Morè* and *Lule lule* at the final celebration dinner, testifying common roots that strengthen and look far away.



My suitcase is heavier, because it is enriched by the cry and the song of many souls who have found their serenity in the encounter with God, a serenity that, now, can contribute to friendship and reuniting of peoples, in the name of forgiveness.

"We condemn evil, not people".

Maria Antonietta Manna