



The Journey to Poland, July 2009

For a long time, Zahava and I had planned the journey to Poland. We perceive this quest, which symbolises, above all, identification with those murdered and with the survivors, as a duty imposed on every Jew, even though it is difficult and painful.

We were very hesitant in choosing the guide who would walk with us on the paths of the camps, in the barracks [and] in the gas chambers – the guide with whom we were to reach the towns where my parents lived and together with whom we were to locate the remains of their houses, of the synagogue and of the Jewish cemetery.

It was important to us that the guide be someone familiar with the history of the People of Israel, who had studied the Holocaust and who was well acquainted with the camps and forests where women, men and children were murdered.



One morning, we went, together with a group of Mekorot [Water Company] workers, on the traditional March of the Springs, which takes place every year, next to the Gan Ha'Shlosha [National Park]. While we were walking along the embankment of the empty fish ponds, we noticed a group of girls and boys with a large container of grapefruits next to them. They were squeezing refreshing juice and offering it to the hikers. I asked for the price of a glass of juice and they replied, "Only five shekels".

"Why don't you raise the price to ten shekels?", I asked. One of the boys looked at me and said, "Everyone even complains about five shekels". I asked them towards what they would be putting the money they would earn. They replied that the funds were meant to cover part of their journey to Poland.

"And who is the guide going with you?", I asked with interest. Upon hearing my question, their counsellor joined the conversation and she told me, "He is a member of Kibbutz Nir David and his name is Akiva Azulai".

I obtained Akiva's telephone number and called him immediately - in the middle of the outing. Akiva explained to me that, during the trip, it is his custom to stop in the cities and towns that some of the participants wish to visit, provided that they are close to the planned route, and provided that he is given the names of the cities and towns before the trip. This is what sets his touring programme apart. All participants of the tour visit the desired towns. I also received explanations from him about the costs and we agreed that Zahava and I would join his group on a journey to Poland.

In July 2009, seventeen of us set out on a journey. In addition to Akiva the guide, we were also joined by an agreeable and courteous Polish guide. He served as chauffeur to the Israeli ambassador to Poland, Szewach Weiss, and was fluent in Polish and Hebrew. With me, I also took the book of

poems "Open Closed Open" by Yehuda Amichai, published by Schocken, 1998. This book accompanied us throughout the entire, painful quest.

Unlike previous years, when we watched the main ceremony at Yad Vashem and participated in the ceremonies held in the cemeteries, now we were in the heart of the camps - entering the barracks, the gas chambers, the torture chambers and the furnaces – and the mind refused to grasp it.

When we were walking in the woods, gathering around the killing pits where hundreds of thousands were buried, we had the opportunity to watch a memorial service held by young members of a B'nei Akiva¹ yeshiva, who happened to be there. We listened to their prayers and the *Kaddish* that was said with devotion and weeping. Finally, the sound of the shofar was heard and its blast pierced the canopy, breaking its way out of the forest as if to say, "We are here!".

In Birkenau we met a Jew from Greece, who had come with his sons and grandsons. His upper lip was cleft and a scar was seared onto his forehead. He told of the difficult years - of the hunger and suffering [and] of the beatings and tortures he had suffered.

I asked him about the height of the grass, which envelops the camp barracks - green and fresh vegetation. He replied, "Had in our time the grass grown to such a height, believe me, we wouldn't have gone hungry".

In another camp, near the memorial monument, we come upon a large mound of dark grey dirt. Hundreds of crows lay on the mound, pecking incessantly. You ask yourself, "What are they pecking at so lustfully?" and, for a moment, you are shocked and then you tell yourself, "God, this soil is saturated with the blood of our brethren – their burnt bones still lay here".

We continue onwards and we find ourselves in a room near the crematoria, in front of hundreds of pictures of Jews who had perished. We examine each image very carefully = perhaps, by chance, we will be able to identify someone - although it is clear that there is no chance of that. We go out and hold a memorial service. The burning candle, which does not go out in spite of the rising wind, perhaps best of all symbolises the resurrection of our people.

The Visit to Krzepice

The road signals indicated we were headed towards our yearned-for destinations - Krzepice and Lututów. The moment, to which I had aspired above all else, had arrived. Moved, I took up the microphone and told my fellow tourists about the two towns, their history and what had characterised their Jewish populations. I spoke briefly regarding the fact that the Germans had already invaded by the first night of the War. I talked about the deportation of the Jews after two years of occupation and about their transfer to the ghettos, labour camps [and] concentration camps. I spoke about the cruel and systematic process of extermination of our people, including my own family.

The nearer we drew, so grew my excitement. Suddenly, my voice began to tremble. It was difficult for me to continue speaking. The friends [on the bus] shared in my emotion.

Here, for the very first time, I was looking at the road sign indicating that we were in Krzepice. Who would have believed that I would ever reach the town where my father had been born – the town

¹ [TN: Viz. modern religious Zionists.]

where my family had lived for generations and which had had a large and impressive Jewish community?

The bus stopped on ul. Sienkiewicza, the main street where my family had lived. My father's barbershop had been located on this street. We only stopped for a few minutes, due to the busy traffic. We alighted briefly, just to have our picture taken. I was reminded of a photo I had received from Fela Kopel, showing Chana, my father's first wife, and her sister. Had this photo been taken on the threshold to the barbershop, on the steps leading to its entrance?

We got back on the bus, and continued towards the synagogue. I showed the driver the way there. I felt the place was familiar to me, as if I had visited there before. This was actually my first visit.

From footage and photos from friends who had been in the town, I was, without any hesitation, able to instruct the driver to pass over the bridge crossing the Liswarta River.



A typical street in Krzepice



A side-street in Krzepice



Entering Krzepice

The walls supporting the bridge were painted in wide blue and white stripes - what a coincidence! After crossing the river, we parked on the right side of the road. On the left, we found the remains of the synagogue. In reverence, we stood in front of the destroyed structure. Its exterior walls and impressive columns remained standing, a testament to its former glory. The entrance was blocked by chains, on which were placed signs in Polish warning of the danger of collapse.

We lit memorial candles and continued our journey towards the cemetery. On our way, between the synagogue and the cemetery, we passed a small, well-kept, residential neighbourhood with several single-story residences. I suppose that these houses had once belonged to Jewish families. Today, Poles live there.

The bus came as close to the cemetery as the road permitted, until it came to an end, and we continued on foot. The path passed through agricultural land. We walked slowly and carefully, due to the moist soil. We stopped at the end of the woods, where the cemetery lay. An announcement was pasted on one of the trees in Hebrew, "We, high school yeshiva students from Jerusalem, visited

the site, tended to the graves, repaired some of them and cleared the brush surrounding the graves".



The façade of the Krzepice Synagogue



Zahava and I at the front of the Krzepice Synagogue

They, the yeshiva pupils, had carried out a sacred task. The Krzepice Cemetery is renowned for its uniqueness. It differs from all the cemeteries that we know, in that the pillars of the headstones are made of cast iron, and therefore most of them have been preserved – and, above all, the inscriptions on them have been preserved.

My travelling companions and I walked quietly amongst the silent graves. I very soon located the surnames with which I had come to be familiar - Granek and Zołtak, Monic and Rapoport, Lachman, Wimmer and Mendelewicz, Sandler, and others. We stood before their graves, grieving and in pain, evoking the memories of their family members, lamenting the cruel destiny of their sons and daughters, of their grandsons and granddaughters - whose place of burial is unknown, but who will be, evermore in our hearts, cherished.

We held a memorial service. The ceremony began with one minute of silence, after which we said *Kaddish* and lit memorial candles. I refused to say the "Mourner's *Kaddish*", which appears in the prayer-books in commemoration of the deceased. This prayer extols, lauds and aggrandises God's name - "*He who creates peace [in His celestial heights], may He create peace for us and for all Israel, and say, Amen*". Would it have been proper for me to utter prayers, aggrandising the name of He who abides in the celestial heights, on the soil of Poland which is saturated with the blood of millions of our sons?

No! That is not *my* god. I shall not say anything in His praise and I shall certainly not attribute, to Him, the ability of hastening the arrival of the Messiah. As far as *I* am concerned - He concluded His duties when His People were incinerated in the crematoria. *He* is the one carrying the banner of defeat, when He did not stand by His People who were murdered by torture.

"On this occasion", I told my fellow travellers, "I wish to evoke the memory of those who perished - to aggrandise the name of those deceased, who died for the sanctification of the [Jewish] People and the name [of God] - a people who did not go as cattle to the slaughter, but who organised itself, revolted and fought as best as it could - a people who were oppressed and who rose from the dust in order to wreak vengeance, to establish a state and to attain freedom. It is on the wings of this sanctity that we welcome the arrival of the Messiah - this and no other. This was *their* belief – as is also our own".



The cemetery in Krzepice

Once I had concluded my address at the Krzepice Cemetery, I thought it appropriate to quote a fragment of Yehuda Amichai's poem ***Gods Change, Prayers Remain Forever*** (from the book of poems *Open Closed Open*, Schocken, 1998):

*After Auschwitz, there is no theology:
From the chimneys of the Vatican, white smoke rises-
a sign that the cardinals have chosen a pope for themselves.
From the crematoria of Auschwitz, black smoke rises-
a sign the Gods have not yet chosen the Chosen People.*

*After Auschwitz, there is no theology:
The numbers on the forearms of the inmates of extermination
are the telephone numbers of God –
numbers that do not answer
and are now disconnected, one by one.*

*After Auschwitz, there is a new theology:
The Jews who died in the Holocaust
have now become like their God –
who has no likeness of a body, and has no body.
They have no likeness of a body, and they have no body.*

Amichai's likening of the numbers etched into the forearms of the prisoners with God's unresponsive telephone numbers is a hard and painful comparison - and it expresses my own views.

I thanked my travelling companions for the time they had dedicated to the visit in Krzepice and I thanked them for having taken part in the commemorative moments.

The Visit to Lututów

We returned to the bus and set out towards the town of Lututów. After about a half-hour journey, we arrived in the peaceful, quiet and cleanly town.

We drove along the main road and came to a halt near a new and modern building, whose construction had been completed in recent months. The building is used to train youth in extracurricular subjects, such as operating computer systems [and] social activities. The headquarters of the town's Fire Department is also there.

Opposite this building, across the street, the synagogue stood in all its glory. The synagogue was damaged during the War and was renovated directly after the fighting. The Polish guide and I turned towards the synagogue. We walked all around it, but all the openings were padlocked. Through the windows, we could get the impression that the locals had converted it into a factory for the production of fabrics or plywood.



Zahava and I walking in the Lututów market square

Next to the synagogue, there was a private residence. An old lady of about eighty was pottering about in the yard, doing different chores. Due to her age, I innocently assumed that it would be possible to draw, from her, many details regarding the town's Jews. We attempted to converse with her in her own language. The Polish guide appealed to her repeatedly, but she refused to respond and did not give in to his pleading, even after he had assured her that we had not come to investigate as to whom the house, where she was living, had previously belonged (the community's dignitaries usually lived next to the synagogue).

The old woman's son suddenly arrived. He spoke quite good English. We began talking, but the conversation was interrupted by a call proceeding from the adjacent building - "Come quickly - there are very interesting things here".

I hastened to enter the building. My fellow tourists were already gathered in the room, which contained three computer stations, as well as three trainees and a young female instructor, who was pudgy and short. She spoke briefly with the Polish guide and he translated her words. He said that she understood that we were from Israel and that, if her memory served her right, several photos had arrived via email lately, which had been sent by Holocaust survivors from Lututów or by their children.

Why had the photos been sent? This, the instructor was unable to explain. She tried to find some of them and showed them to us. I looked at the pictures closely. I found nothing of great interest in the first four, but the fifth photo left me open-mouthed. I attempted to contain my emotions and I asked my companions to take a seat - but I was unable to hold it in and I burst out in tears.

“The child in the photo”, I said, with tears choking my throat, “is me”. Next to me were standing my father and mother and several other survivors who had made it to Munich. I could not believe what I was seeing. My friends, too, thought it incredible. I recognised myself - I was about one year old at the time. I remembered already having seen this photo in the past – I think my mother gave it to me. It was taken in 1947 in Munich and, in it, are also my uncle Juda-Lajb and his wife Alte (the photo appears in the chapter about my uncle Juda-Lajb and his family on p.117).

How is it that this image had reached the computer science training room in Lututów? Who had sent it and for what purpose? I have not received an answer to these questions.

The excitement in the room was great. The Polish instructor noticed this and told our guide that there were books in her office about the town. Seeing that I was showing a particular interest, she suggested that I buy a copy of one of the books written in Polish, even though I do not speak the language. I purchased the book, as a souvenir from my exciting visit, for twenty-five złoty. After we returned home to Israel, I started leafing through the book and there, on one of the pages, I again found the picture in which I was photographed - a one-year-old boy with a group of Holocaust survivors from Lututów, who had gathered for a meeting in a hall next to the DP camps near Munich, on their way to Israel.

Once more, my eyes filled with tears. What did this publication mean? Why was it important for the book's editor to publish this picture, along with additional details about the Jews of Lututów prior to the outbreak of the Second World War?

I approached a Polish-speaking friend, who provided a surprising explanation - the book had been published as one of the events commemorating the six hundred anniversary of the town's founding. The book's publisher had contacted Jews from the town, scattered around the world, who had survived the inferno, asking them to provide photos of themselves, before and after the outbreak of the War, as well as information on the fates they had met. Only some five pictures arrived, including the one in which I was photographed.

Well, that one-year-old boy - the only one in the group of adults - currently lives in Israel and is writing this book *Beyond Silence*, named for the silence of his parents and their Holocaust survivor friends.