

Not Ordinary Church

Pilgrimage: Prelude and Fugue **At the Holocaust memorial Museum, Washington D.C.** **Allyson Sawtell, 9/19**

1.

A candle from the Holocaust Memorial Museum sits in my living room.

Unlit.

Not a souvenir; a remembrance.

I don't know yet what occasion is worthy of its light,
what moments it will make sacred and haunt with its burning.

2.

We presented our tickets at the memorial's entrance and went in.

The large elevator – so like a cattle car – took us to the fourth floor.

The doors opened to hushed twilight, the visceral blow of silence.

We moved through the hallways of history:

of denial, silence, destruction, pain, loss, courage, heroism.

Past multitudes of old shoes, each one unique.

Stolen, discarded

Empty.

Faded, dusty.

Strongly made, would last for years. Empty, faded.

Some looked as if their occupants just stepped out for a bit and would be right back.

So many soles meant to hold, filled with emptiness.

Standing witness to lives of direction and dance.

Standing witness to the unspeakable and the senseless.

The floor became cobblestones, old and worn.

My sturdy shoes felt their shape and their history.

I stood in unprotected connection

I stood on holy ground: the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Desecrated cobblestones of despair and anguish.

Sacred cobblestones of defiance and courage.

An uprising happened here, ultimately put down.

(yet history calls it the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, not The Warsaw Ghetto Downfall)

Beaten down yet rising still

on these cobbles...

...which became a smooth passageway of photographs of a shtetl soon to be annihilated.

Pictures:

Horses pulling carts

Children playing in the snow
Bearded grandfathers in smiling conversation.
Life captured for a moment in all its precious normality.

The shtetl that is no more. A community made extinct.

A hallway of stricken history and stolen future.

In the midst of that collage, a portrait reached through glass and time and held me still.

A young woman. Dark hair and eyes. Smiling gently.

No name. No context.

Extinction has a face.

Her life looked out at me and settled into my heart.

You will not be erased, I promised her. I will take you with me.

I will hold you in my heart

Your life and breath

Your love and joy

Your everyday frustrations.

I will hold you in my heart

Your pain and fear and tragedy. The horror, violence, terror of your last moments

You will not be erased.

I will take you with me.

And together we fight extinction and defy erasure.

I *will* hold you in my heart.

But what privilege makes me say, "I will take you with me,"

that I am doing you a favor, that the doing is all mine,

that the power of remembrance originates with me,

that you need me.

I need you

to push me

to break me open

to make me grab for courage

Don't permit me this power, this lofty "I will take you with me."

Haunt me instead, with your own power:

the power of your very real life,

and the powerlessness of your violation

The power of your memory.

The powers that be did not value your life,

but they do not define worth.

You were real. You mattered.

That is what you gave me through the glass, what holds me still, what I honor,

what I pray will haunt me forever:

You matter, now and forever

And yes, together we fight extinction and defy erasure.

3.

We made our way, in dusk, past the camps, past the death chambers,
past pictures of the silence breakers and risk takers who fought for and saved from,
past videos of liberating Allies, standing as honor guard
for survivors shouting as their bound torturers were led away.

Then we entered a room of soft warmth and candles. Like a sigh.

Not a balm but the embrace of a weeping universe.

And remembrance.

And then what? So what?

So that....

I am changed. We are changed
so that...

We push to shove away denial,
together enter into the pain, see the face of all within creation on the brink of erasure
...and be changed

Be haunted

But rise

4.

This is not only about the Holocaust Memorial Museum
(which is not simply a museum, where you look at the past, safely removed behind a pane of
glass, but it's a living memorial, a remembrance,
your heart shattered like glass and there is no protection.

It enters you and re-members itself inside your soul,
barbed wire rips ragged wounds, gas cuts off your breath of life,
defiance and resistance on cobbled streets against the odds for a brief moment
but enshrined as an insect in amber, its DNA still intact.)

This is about pilgrimage

Into

Out of

We don't sightsee our way through the world.

We make pilgrimage in the world,
into its pain,
out of our silence

Pilgrimage is a remaking.

So I enter into the pain of the world and find already there
all those for whom my silence has been a visceral blow,
and am hauntingly, jaggedly, and incompletely remade.

Perhaps this is why pilgrims often travel on their knees.

It is not me, nobly “taking you with me”, to keep your memory alive.

It is you who broke through the glass pane to haunt me.

Presence demands remembrance.

No one should be erased.

It’s us being shaken awake by a spirit that will not be silenced

but will haunt,

because what has been disappeared deserved to live

because what has been erased matters in the web of life

because the ripped apart, the raped, the refused and reviled

demand repair and justice and voice and recognition of their own worth

If not us, who?

If not now, when?



This document is shared under the terms of [a Creative Commons license](#), which allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. You may contact Rev. Allyson Sawtell at Allyson@RevSawtell.org