

Sign of Folly

THE CROSS IS MADE of stout beams, an intersection of railroad ties. It stands in a field of weeds that slopes down from the road. The field is abutted on one side by the old theater, where gas canisters were stored, also looted gold; where, much later, Carmelite nuns accomplished cloistered works of expiation, sparking fury; and where, now, a municipal archive is housed. On another side, the field runs up against the brick wall, the eastern limit of the main camp.

At more than twenty feet, the cross nearly matches the height of the wall, although not the wall's rusted thistle of barbed wire. Immediately beyond are the camp barracks, the peaked roofs visible against the gray morning sky. The nearest building, close enough to hit with a stone thrown from the foot of the cross, is Barracks 13, also known as the death bunker or the starvation bunker. In one of its cells the Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe was martyred. He is now a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Kolbe is the reason for this cross.

In 1979, Karol Wojtyla came home to nearby Kraków as Pope John Paul II. He celebrated Mass in an open field for a million of his countrymen, and on the makeshift altar this same cross had been mounted — hence its size, large enough to prompt obeisance from the farthest member of the throng. Visiting the death camp, the pope prayed for and to Father Kolbe, who had voluntarily taken the place of a fellow inmate in the death bunker. The pope prayed for and to Edith Stein, the convert who had also died in the camp, and whom he would declare a Catholic saint in 1998. She was a Carmelite nun known as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, but the Nazis murdered her for being a Jew. In his sermon that day, the pope called Auschwitz the “Golgotha of the modern world.”¹ As he had at other times, John Paul II expressed the wish that a place of prayer and penance could be built at the site of the death camp to honor the Catholic martyrs

and to atone for the murders: at Auschwitz and its subcamp, Birkenau, the Nazis killed perhaps as many as a quarter of a million non-Jewish Poles and something like a million and a half Jews. Fulfilling the pontiff's hope, a group of Carmelite nuns moved into the old theater in the autumn of 1984. They intended especially to offer prayers in memory of their sister Teresa Benedicta. The mother superior of this group was herself named Teresa.²

The Carmelite presence at the gate of Auschwitz was immediately protested by leaders of Jewish groups throughout Europe and in the United States and Israel. "Stop praying for the Jews who were killed in the *Shoah*," one group pleaded. "Let them rest in peace as Jews."³ Jewish protesters invaded the grounds of the convent, carrying banners that said, "Leave Our Dead Alone!" and "Do Not Christianize Auschwitz and *Shoah*!"⁴ The protesters registered complaints about Father Kolbe, who before his arrest had been the publisher of a journal that had printed antisemitic articles, and about Edith Stein, whose conversion could only look to Jews like apostasy.

Polish Catholics from the nearby towns of Oświęcim and Birkenau rallied to the nuns' defense. Fights broke out. "One More Horror at Auschwitz," read a headline in a British paper. "They crucified our God," a boy screamed during one demonstration. "They killed Jesus."⁵ At one point the nuns' supporters arrived carrying the stout wooden cross from the papal altar in Kraków. They planted the cross in the field next to the old theater. However piously intended, it could seem a stark act of Christian sovereignty, a sacrilege. Eventually John Paul II intervened in the dispute, offering to fund a new convent building for the Carmelites a few hundred yards away. He prevailed on the nuns to move. The sisters did so in 1994. In the compromise that was worked out, Jewish leaders in turn accepted that the cross would remain in the field near the wall, but only temporarily.

In early 1998, the Polish government, perhaps responding to pressure from American senators friendly to Jews — pressure exerted just prior to the U.S. Senate's vote on Poland's admission to NATO — announced that the cross, like the convent before it, would be removed. "The cross overlooks the camp, which is unacceptable for Orthodox Jews," a Polish official said, "because it imposes Christian symbols." But a month later, before the removal had occurred, Poland's Roman Catholic primate, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, insisted that the cross should remain where it was. Jewish leaders again protested, prompting an expression of concern from the Vatican. At Auschwitz itself, Polish Catholics began to plant new crosses,

appropriate to a cemetery, making the point that Catholics, too, died at the camp. The dispute raged throughout 1998, with escalations even to the point of homemade explosive devices being planted in the field by radical Catholics. More than one hundred small crosses were put in the ground. Finally, in 1999, in an odd “compromise,” the Polish parliament passed a law requiring the removal of the smaller crosses but making the papal cross permanent. The small crosses were taken away by Polish officials, but the large cross remains at Auschwitz to this day.

What does the cross of Jesus Christ mean at such a place? What does it mean to Jews? What does it mean to Christians? Or to Polish Catholics? Or to those for whom religious symbols are empty? What does the cross there signal about our understanding of the past? And what of the future? If Auschwitz has become a sacred center of Jewish identity, what does the cross there imply about the relations between Jews and Christians, and between Judaism and Christianity? These questions were in my mind one November morning as I stood alone before that cross.

I thought of the pope’s designation of this place as Golgotha, and I recognized the ancient Christian impulse to associate extreme evil with the fate of Jesus, precisely as a way of refusing to be defeated by that evil. At the Golgotha of the crucifixion, death became the necessary mode of transcendence, first for Jesus and then, as Christians believe, for all. But I also thought of that banner, “Do Not Christianize Auschwitz and *Shoah*!” Can mechanized mass murder be a mode of transcendence? I could imagine the narrowed eyes of a Jewish protester as he detected in prayers offered before the cross at Auschwitz echoes of the old refrain “Jews out!” — only now was it Jewish anguish that was expected to yield before Christian hope? If Auschwitz must stand for Jews as the abyss in which meaning itself died, what happens when Auschwitz becomes the sanctuary of someone else’s recovered piety?

Christians are not the only ones who have shown themselves ready to use the memory of the six million to advance an ideology: Orthodox Jews can see a punishment for secularism; Zionists can see an organizing rationale for the state of Israel; opponents of “land for peace” can see a justification for a permanent garrison mentality.⁶ The “memorialists,” who have raised the new temples of Holocaust museums and memorials in the cities of the West, have anointed memory itself as the deepest source of meaning. The legend engraved at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the first Holocaust memorial, reads, “Forgetfulness is the way to exile. Remembrance is the way to redemption.”

The God who led a people out of Egypt is, of course, a redeeming God,

but at Auschwitz the question must have become, Are God's saving acts only in the past? Some formerly religious Jews saw in the Holocaust only the absence of God, and moved on without faith. Other Jews went from atheism to the faith of Job, an affirmation devoid of piety. There are the Jewish voices, from Elie Wiesel to Richard Rubenstein to Emil Fackenheim, who reject the idea that suffering such as Jews underwent in the death camps — a million children murdered — can be meaningful. To value those deaths in such a way is to diminish their horror. And there are the voices of Emmanuel Levinas,⁷ who speaks of the Holocaust as a "tumor in the memory,"⁸ and Theodor Adorno, who, in a famous essay, argued that the entire enterprise of education must change after the Holocaust.⁹ "Auschwitz negates all systems, opposes all doctrines," Wiesel argues. "They cannot but diminish the experience which lies beyond our reach."¹⁰ These and other figures insist that the Holocaust shatters all previous categories of meaning, certainly including Christian categories. But isn't the state of being shattered, once reflected upon and articulated, itself a category? Does the very act of thinking about the Holocaust, in other words, diminish its horror by refusing to treat it as unthinkable? The more directly one faces the mystery of the Holocaust, the more elusive it becomes.

Perhaps the voice a troubled Christian most needs to hear is that of the Jew who says the Holocaust must be made to teach nothing. "What consequences, then, are to be drawn from the Holocaust?" asks the theologian Jacob Neusner. "I argue that none are to be drawn, none for Jewish theology and none for the life of Jews with one another, which were not there before 1933. Jewish theologians do no good service to believers when they claim that 'Auschwitz' denotes a turning point."¹¹ That voice is useful because if Jewish responses to the Holocaust, which range from piety to nihilism, are complex and multifaceted, Christian interpretations of the near elimination of Jews from Europe, however respectfully put forth, must inevitably be even more problematic. The cross signifies the problem: When suffering is seen to serve a universal plan of salvation, its particular character as tragic and evil is always diminished.¹² The meaningless can be made to shimmer with an eschatological hope, and at Auschwitz this can seem like blasphemy.

But what about an effort less ambitious than the search for meaning or the imposition of theology? What if the cross at Auschwitz is an object before which Christians only want to kneel and pray? And, fully aware of what happened there, what if we Christians want to pray for Jews? Why

does that offend? How can prayers for the dead be a bad thing? But what if such prayers, offered with good intentions, effectively evangelize the dead? What if they imply that the Jews who died at Auschwitz are to be ushered into the presence of God by the Jesus whom they rejected? Are Jews then expected to see at last the truth to which, all their lives, they had been blind? Seeing that truth in the beatific vision, are they then to bow down before Jesus as Messiah in an act of postmortem conversion? Shall the afterlife thus be *judenrein* too? Elie Wiesel tells “a joke which is not funny.” It concerns an SS officer whose torment of a Jew consisted in his pretending to shoot the Jew dead, firing a blank, while simultaneously knocking him unconscious. When the Jew regained consciousness, the Nazi told him, “You are dead, but you don’t know it. You think that you escaped us? We are your masters, even in the other world.” Wiesel comments, “What the Germans wanted to do to the Jewish people was to substitute themselves for the Jewish God.”¹³ Here is the question a Christian must ask: Does our assumption about the redemptive meaning of suffering, tied to the triumph of Jesus Christ and applied to the Shoah, inevitably turn every effort to atone for the crimes of the Holocaust into a claim to be the masters of Jews in the other world?

Once, for Christians to speak among ourselves about the murder of the six million as a kind of crucifixion would have seemed an epiphany of compassion, paying the Jews the highest tribute, as if the remnant of Israel had at last become, in this way, the Body of Christ. Yet such spiritualizing can appear to do what should have been impossible, which is to make the evil worse: the elimination of Jewishness from the place where Jews were eliminated. The Body of Christ? If Jesus had been bodily at Auschwitz, as protesting Jews insisted, he would have died an anonymous victim with a number on his arm, that’s all. And he’d have done so not as the Son of God, not as the redeemer of humankind, not as the Jewish Messiah, but simply as a Jew. And in a twist of history folding back on itself, his crime would have been tied to the cross — “He killed our God!” That indictment, first brought as an explicit charge of deicide as early as the second century by a bishop, Melito of Sardis,¹⁴ was officially quashed by the bishops of the Second Vatican Council in 1965,¹⁵ yet it remains the ground of all Jew hatred. That, at bottom, is why it is inconceivable that any Jew should look with equanimity on a cross at Auschwitz, and why no Christian should be able to behold it there as anything but a blow to conscience. “Though there were other social and economic conditions which were necessary before the theological antecedents of antisemitism could

be turned into the death camps of our times,” the Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein has written, “only the terrible accusation, known and taught to every Christian in earliest childhood, that the Jews are the killers of the Christ can account for the depth and persistence of this supreme hatred.”¹⁶

I am certain that the first time I would have heard the word “Jew” was from the pulpit of St. Mary’s Church in Alexandria, Virginia, where I lived as a child. My father was an Air Force general working at the Pentagon, but we made our family life in the Old South river port down the Potomac, where the Catholic parish was the oldest in Virginia. It would have surely been one Holy Week when I was six or seven that I heard the mythic words proclaimed: “The Jews cried out with one voice, ‘Crucify him!’” But the first remembered time I heard the word “Jew” was from a boy who lived next door. Let’s call him Peter Seligman. The hint of something in his last name had registered with me not at all.

Peter and I were probably about ten years old. Though he went to the local public school — the Protestant school, to me — Peter was then my best friend. I loved running with him through the woods just south of Alexandria, slapping our thighs as if we rode in the cavalry — a word I was already confusing with Calvary — dodging branches, leaping the narrow creek that was our constant point of reference. I remember one summer day coming upon an overgrown stone wall surrounded by tall trees and choked by briars, the vestige of a former pasture or farmer’s field. The aura of a lost past drew us, and when Peter announced solemnly, “I bet this was built by slaves,” I stepped back. A door in my brain snapped open, and whenever I think of slavery, I think of that wall.

Perhaps it was the same wall that inspired a game we used to play, the two of us betraying our northern origins — I was born in Chicago; the Seligmans seemed, perhaps in stereotype, to be New Yorkers — by pretending to be Mosby’s Rangers. We called ourselves Jeb Stuart and Stonewall Jackson. I see now the shared loneliness in our romping fantasy, because the other boys with whom we might have played were native Virginians, defensive heirs of a rural culture that was being turned into suburb before their eyes, not only by outsiders, but by the ancient enemy — us. The other boys had shunned me and Peter as Yankees, which perhaps accounts for our rather desperate play at being not just Johnny Rebs but true Confederate heroes.

Sometimes our hard rides through the woods took us to Gum Springs,

a shantytown with dusty, unpaved streets where Negroes lived, the hired laborers and croppers whom we often saw doing menial chores for the white contractors of the new subdivisions. In Gum Springs we saw black people with each other. Once — it must have been a Sunday — Peter and I crept up a deserted street to a small white-steepled church. We listened to the congregation singing hymns, glimpsing the men's dark suits and ties, the ladies' hats, the uplifted brown faces. When a deacon looked our way, we turned and ran.

After that, reciting the Lord's Prayer with its confession of the sin of "trespass," I thought of Gum Springs. Even now, the image of its shacks and dirt streets stabs me with guilt. Gum Springs, teaching me that I am white, laid bare another meaning of Mosby's raids. I associate this first felt recognition of anti-black racism with Peter, my fellow would-be Reb, my fellow crypto-Yankee, my fellow white, my friend. Rarely would I share a sense of so many levels of complexity with another. But then Peter forced a next recognition, and it changed everything.

Within a year or two of our move to Alexandria, my father, an avid golfer, was elected to membership in the Belle Haven Country Club, an old Virginia enclave a mile or two up Fort Hunt Road from where we lived. As an Irish Catholic carpetbagger, Dad would have been decidedly unclubbable, but this was Red Scare time, and as head of Air Force counterintelligence, he was a spymaster with profile. I took the "privilege" entirely for granted, but at Belle Haven, too, I sensed the difference between me and the sons and daughters of the first families of Virginia. So one day I asked Peter why he and his parents never came to the swimming pool at Belle Haven.

"We don't go there," he said simply.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a club, and we're Jews."

I do not recall what, if anything, the word "Jews" meant to me, but "club" — Peter and I were a club of two — seemed only friendly. I pushed, saying that Belle Haven was fun, that we could go there on our bikes.

Peter explained calmly what he knew, and what I had yet to admit: "Jewish" was a synonym for unwelcome. "Unwelcome," he could have said, "in this case by you." I was a notorious blusher, and I blushed then, I am sure.

"No big deal," he said, but I saw for the first time that Peter and I were on opposite sides of a kind of color line. I took for granted that Negroes were unwelcome at Belle Haven, except as caddies. But Jews?

“No big deal” meant, We’re not discussing this further. Which was fine with me.

Later, I asked my mother, and she explained that the Seligmans’ being Jewish meant they did not believe what we believed. About Jesus, I knew at once. And those Holy Week readings from the pulpit at St. Mary’s must have come back to me: This has to do with Jesus and what they did to him. That easily, I was brought into the sanctuary of the Church’s core idea, even without removing my hat.

My mother added a phrase that served her as standard punctuation. “Live and let live,” she said with a shrug. “The Seligmans are good people.” Much later, I would understand the slogan and my mother’s coda as her own private rejection of the then reigning Catholic ethos of “Outside the Church there is no salvation,” but to me that day her reaction seemed dismissive. She had efficiently sidestepped the fear I had that my one friendship in that alien territory had somehow been put at risk. Indeed, my belated recognition of the Seligmans’ Jewishness in the context of their exclusion — Jewish means unwelcome — accounted for why my and Peter’s parents had extended to each other nothing beyond a minimal neighborliness. If the Seligmans were unwelcome at Belle Haven, they were just as unwelcome in our house. It would take many years before I began to understand the deadly effect that this introduction to Jewishness had on me. Even as I set myself against antisemitism,¹⁷ this essentially negative framing would condemn me to think of Jews as candidates for rejection. Although I self-consciously refused to reject Jews, I was still defining them by my refusal. Whether I am capable of allowing Jews to define themselves in purely positive terms, with no reference to a dominant Christian culture, whether anti- or philosemitic, remains an open question. That, in turn, underscores “the depth and persistence,” in Rubenstein’s phrase, “of this supreme hatred.” How could hatred have stood in any way between Peter and me? Yet now I see that it did.

Even when the cross of Jesus Christ is planted at Auschwitz as a sign of Christian atonement for that hatred, and not of anti-Jewish accusation, the problem remains. By associating the Jewish dead with a Christian notion of redemption, are the desperate and despised victims of the Nazis thus transformed into martyrs whose fate could seem not only meaningful but privileged? What Jew would not be suspicious of a Christian impulse to introduce that category, martyrdom, into the story of the genocide? Jews as figures of suffering — negation, denial, hatred, guilt — are at

the center of this long history, although always, until now, their suffering was proof of God's rejection of them. Is Jewish suffering now to be taken as a sign of God's approval? Golgotha of the modern world¹⁸ — does that mean real Jews have replaced Jesus as the sacrificial offering, their deaths as the source of universal salvation? Does this Jew-friendly soteriology turn full circle into a new rationale for a Final Solution?

Uneasiness with such associations has prompted some Jews to reject the very word "holocaust" as applied to the genocide, since in Greek it means "burnt offering." The notion that God would accept such an offering is deeply troubling.¹⁹ When the genocide is instead referred to as the Shoah, a Hebrew word meaning "catastrophe," a wall is being erected against the consolations and insults of a redemptive, sacrificial theology of salvation. *Shoah*, in its biblical usage, points to the absence of God's creative hovering, the opposite of which is rendered as "*ruach*." *Ruach* is the breath of God, which in Genesis drew order out of chaos. *Shoah* is its undoing.²⁰

Such subtleties of terminology were not on my mind when I went to Auschwitz as a writer working on a magazine article. I am a novelist and an essayist, and in presuming to relate a history that culminates at the cross at Auschwitz, I do so with an eye to details and connections that a historian might omit or that a scholar might dismiss. I am looking for turns in the story in which one impulse overrode another, one character reversed the action of another, all with unanticipated, ever-graver consequences. And if I am a professional writer, it is not irrelevant to my purpose that I am an amateur Catholic — a Catholic, that is, holding to faith out of *love*. Yet love for the Church can look like grief, even anger. Nevertheless, my intensity of feeling is itself what has brought me here. So my life as a storyteller and my faith as a Catholic qualify me to detect essential matters in this history that a more detached, academic examination, whatever its virtues, might miss.

Yet in coming to Auschwitz, I knew enough to be suspicious of emotional intensity, as if what mattered here were the reactions of a visitor. So I had summoned detachment of another kind. In coming to the death camp, I had resolved to guard against conditioned responses, even as I felt them: the numbness, the choked-back grief, the supreme sentimentality of a self-justifying Catholic guilt. I had visited the barracks, the ovens, the naked railway platform, the stark field of chimneys, more or less in control of my reactions. But before the cross something else took over. Even as I knew to guard against the impulse to "Christianize the Holocaust,"

I was doing it — by looking into this abyss through the lens of a faith that has the cross embedded in it like a sighting device. Perhaps I was Christianizing the Holocaust by instinctively turning it into an occasion of Christian repentance. The Shoah throws many things into relief — the human capacity for depravity, the cost of ethnic absolutism, the final inadequacy both of religious language and of silence. But it also highlights the imprisonment of even well-meaning Christians inside the categories with which we approach death and sin. Christian faith can seem to triumph over every evil except Christian triumphalism. When I found myself standing at the foot of that cross, on the transforming edge of a contemporary Golgotha, I knew just what the pope meant when he evoked that image. Yet I reacted as I imagine a Jew might have. The cross here was simply wrong.

Even so, perhaps I was just another Christian presuming to supply a Jewish reaction. But perhaps not. Because of the insistence of Jewish voices — protesters at the cross at Auschwitz and Jewish thinkers who have claimed a preemptive right to interpret the Holocaust in terms consistent with Jewish tradition — the old Christian habit of seeing “the jews”²¹ as a scrim on which to project Christian meanings no longer goes unchallenged. I love the cross, the sign of my faith, yet finally the sight of it here made me, in the words of the spiritual, tremble, tremble, tremble. Because of a resounding Jewish response, I saw the holy object as if it were a chimney. But also, Christian that I am, I saw it through the eyes of the man I have always been. The primordial evil of Auschwitz has now been compounded by the camp’s new character as a flashpoint between Catholics and Jews. So the ancient Christian symbol here, despite my knowledge that it was wrong, was a revelation. I was seeing the cross in its full and awful truth for the first time.