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I Did Not Lose My Father at Auschwitz

Lisa Marcus

I. Red Shoes

The drive through the countryside is pacific, serene, bursting with growing things—children, poppies, chickens, floriferous peonies. A light rain is falling. The rolling hills fold out from the road as a procession of vans and buses make their way to the death camps. Past verdant farms, young forests, graffitied bus stops (do I see X-ed out swastikas, stars of David?), our path is strangely beautiful.

We arrive as a parade of tourists prepares to make witness, and we are enfolded in the throng. “Death-camp Disneyland,” my father quips acerbically. It is insanely crowded. The whole Finnish soccer team—in Poland for Euro 2012/—is here in somber procession.

It is the peonies and the red shoes that stand out to me following our pilgrimage to Auschwitz. The sheer vitality, the defiant beauty stubbornly blooming in the women wearing red sandals, red heels, red clogs to the crematorium. The audacity of red shoes, whose red still bleeds in the shoe showcase in the second floor rooms of confiscated stuff (hair, leg-braces, eyeglasses and baby-clothes).

When I return home and contemplate writing about the shoes, a Google search reveals that there are literally thousands of others who have photographed or otherwise memorialized the red shoes. All of us captivated by the humanity, the blighted hopes, of the murdered shoe owners.

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And there are, of course, poems. After Auschwitz, after making the pilgrimage, despite the injunction of critics like Adorno, people—probably most of them not poets—feel compelled to give their emotions creative form. Poems bloom on the internet as stubbornly as peonies in the Polish fields.

II. I did not lose my father at Auschwitz

My father,
 who may or may not
 have had a stroke three days earlier in Warsaw,
 and who leans on me so hard
 that my left forearm is sore for days,
 musters up a joke to lessen my fear
 that he will crumple here, that I will have to save his life
 at Auschwitz.
 He says,
 (and you have to know that he—a seventy-six year-old
 Jewish New Yorker—is trying to alleviate my anxiety
 with a joke that only he can dispense):
 "If I die today, you will be able to say you lost your father at
 Auschwitz."
 And I laugh.
 Nervously.
 And it works—
 I realize that he won't die here,
 (He didn't die here. Though had his grandfather Azreal
 not packed up his wife and seven children and come to
 America in 1914, had he not fled Kishinev and survived
 pogroms, that family would have perished, slaughtered
 in the woods as virtually all of the Bessarabian Jews
 were)
 I realize that he and I are alive here,
 that we have come here of our own free will,
 (we place a stone on the train car, we peer into the
 wrecked crematoria, I memorize the clumps of hair, the
 baby-clothes, the eyeglasses—he can't make it up the
 stairs to see these rooms—we say kaddish in our heads)
 and we will make it safely home.
 And we do make it through this day, this trip—
 he,
 pushing a wheelchair around Birkenau
 (refusing to be pushed, refusing to sit)
 He won't die here, not today.

And later, as he eats prosciutto in Krakow,
 He says he feels strangely rejuvenated by our day.
 He is effusive, chatty even
 As we share strips of the salty meat and talk
 of peonies and chickens and red shoes.