

NEW JERSEY

Jewish Standard

Visiting a mother's grave at Auschwitz

Stanley Glogover | World |

Published: 30 January 2009



Stanley Glogover, with his daughter-in-law Norma Glogover, at the entrance to Auschwitz. Courtesy Stanley Glogover
 AVENTURA, Fla. – I remember, after the Kaddish was said, after the pale roses were laid down, a light rain falling through trees.

On a gray March day in 2007, I made a visit to what in all likelihood was the grave of my mother, my two younger brothers, Hershek and Moshek, and my infant sister, Itka. The boys were only 11 and 9 when they left the world; Itka was barely 6 months old.

First Person

Their nameless tomb rests in a location to which I once vowed never to return, a death-sown place that had destroyed my teenage years and 28 members of my family.

But the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau are far different now from the time I was detained there, from 1942 to January 1945. It has the dubious honor of being the most heavily visited museum in Poland. Brightly painted buses from many countries are a regular sight in the parking lot, and tourists line up in the cafeteria for its fine soups and pastries.

I went to give testimony to a hard-working documentary TV crew from Britain. I went to make memory whole and love useful, and to honor my dead.

My family and I first arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau in November 1942 on the transport from the Mława Ghetto, in Poland. The rail head was crowded with bewildered travelers, snapping guard dogs, heaps of abandoned luggage, and dull-eyed inmates in striped pajamas. We had no idea of where we were and truly believed that this was just a labor camp.

I recall my mother, Anna Glogover, a pretty auburn-haired woman in her 30s, bouncing my sister in her arms and keeping her good humor at the chaos around us, even when the German clerk came to separate her and my siblings from my father and me.

"We must consider bathing facilities for the ladies and the 'kinder' first," he said politely. "Mein Frau, come with me."

He ushered them away quickly. And I hold this image forever: My mother smiling back at us, my two brothers clinging to

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her coat, baby Itka riding up close to her shoulder.

"See you soon," my mother called out, her voice warm with encouragement. The four of them disappeared in a huge wave of women and children.

I never saw them again.

From that day forth my father, Lazer Glogover, and I entered the pit of the beast the Germans had created. Days of unceasing hunger, terror, illness, and brutalizing work followed. A few weeks later, my father disappeared. I could find no trace of him.

Eventually I found an uncle, Azriel Glogover, working as a Sonderkommando, a Jewish official forced to aid the Nazis by disposing of Jewish corpses.

At great risk, I went at night to his barrack alley, whispering to him through a small window. He had no information on my father, but he told me that he had found my mother and three siblings on the metal corpse cart. Her lifeless fingers so tightly gripped Itka and the boys that Azriel had to pry their dead fingers apart. He and another man had cremated their bodies separately.



Simone Veil, a Holocaust survivor and the honorary president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah, addressing the crowd at the UNESCO Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on Jan. 26, 2009 in Paris.

Devorah Lauter

"I put their ashes in glass jars," my uncle said. "I waited until it was quiet and buried them behind Crematorium Three. Underneath a tree, you can't miss it. It's the only thing growing there."

Despite the curfew and the bitter cold, I had to go and see for myself. The small birch was nothing more than a sapling. I knelt and said Kaddish for them, not caring if the night patrols came upon me with their guns. Nothing in the future could ever be as horrible as this moment.

There are experiences that settle in a man like a stone buried permanently in the flesh.

The jars of ashes beneath the tree are my marker. I see the image of the birch tree now. I shall see it forever.

Through a miraculous fate and the compassion of others, I lived through the next two years and survived to be rehabilitated by the Allies Displaced Persons program.

After the war I wandered through various DP camps, thinking I might at least find someone from my hometown of Makow-Mazowiecki. My search took me across Europe to Italy. At the very last camp in Santa Maria Di Bagni, I was blessed to find my father — alive!

My father and I hadn't seen each other since our time in Auschwitz in 1942; his work detail had been shipped to a camp in Austria. But somehow, when the war was over, we became each other's miracle.

In 1947, the two of us left Europe to begin a whole new life across the Atlantic with relatives in the United States.

More than 60 years have passed since that tumultuous period. The image of the tree and all that is beneath it rises before me.

A British writer friend connected me to the Holocaust documentary crew from Britain.

"Will you come with me to Poland," she asked, "to give your story to the cameras, to bear witness for Mama Anna and the kids?"

The sapling in Birkenau is now a tall, majestic birch, its bark silvered with age, its trunk durable and wide, its leaves shimmering in the wind. Just beyond are the ruins of the crematorium where the grandchildren of former inmates light yahrzeit candles in honor of the lost.

I stand with my daughter-in-law, Norma, and together we lay the roses among the birch's winding roots. We recite the Kaddish and I can't tell whether I grieve or feel relief, or maybe both. Just as the birch grips the earth, I feel anchored with it and sense some emanation of peace from the much-loved presences that lie here.

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A light rain begins to fall through the pale gray branches, and it's time to go. I kiss the tree's trunk and whisper, "I did not forget you."

JTA