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Reporter's Notebook: Israeli leads visit to Auschwitz German 'heirs' of Shoah revisit their painful past

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IN A SENSE, the voyage began last year, when I joined a Berlin group through which children of Holocaust survivors and of non Jewish Germans are seeking to explore how the Shoah has affected their lives.

Yet in September, we undertook our most difficult project yet: a visit to Auschwitz.

Working for the JC has made me face issues which many other Germans have been able to set aside, or ignore. I have interviewed Holocaust survivors, which has often left me feeling uncomfortable and afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Thirteen of us went to Auschwitz, and none travelled lightly. One person's mother had survived five years in Auschwitz, another's grandparents were killed in Sobibor One woman's non Jewish mother was imprisoned for four years in Ravensbrück for helping Jews. Another man's father had served in the SS. And there were those, like myself, whose parents had been swept along on the tide.

I had visited Auschwitz as a teenager, 23 years ago, but I could not remember how my parents had explained this place of death to us.

Now, I felt overwhelmed and at a total loss for words. I sat down in the wooded area, just outside Birkenau and listened to an interview I conducted with my father two years ago.

In 1942, he was drafted into the Wehrmacht as a 19 year old. He joined the cavalry, participated in the withdrawal from Russia and was wounded in Hungary, in 1944.

When I listened to the tape, I mistrusted his denial when he said he had not been involved in the extermination of Jews in Russia.

I was relieved when later in the interview he broke down when talking about the shame he felt at having been part of the Nazi regime.

His argument is that two or three generations later this topic should be dropped. My experiences with the group prove him to be so wrong.

I am aware of how privileged non Jewish Germans are in having a choice to either deal with the Holocaust or avoid it. We are not in danger of being caught up in memories or in having nightmares. During our three day stay, a thought I have entertained for a long time imprinted itself more and more firmly: Germans still do not focus enough on the perpetrators. I have not mourned that thousands of Germans were willing to support the Nazi regime in one way or another, that thousands carried out orders or added to the regime's brutality.

Our visits to the camps were interspersed with psycho dramatic work where we acted out memories, experiences, feelings and images.

I related to the girl who was desperate because her parents would not be open about the Third Reich. I felt the pain of the woman who was never told by her adoptive parents that she was Jewish. I felt too ashamed to bring my father on to the stage.

On the last day, we held a ceremony in Birkenau. Several Jewish participants spoke about their relief at being able to express their emotion.

I am still overcome with helplessness that I cannot undo anything that has happened, but at the same time I want to turn this feeling into constructive responsibility.

Our group leader, Ya'acov Naor who also runs a Tel Aviv psychodrama centre, said the aim was neither reconciliation nor forgiveness, but to create a deeper understanding between the children of survivors and children of perpetrators.