

WE HAVE GONE ASTRAY

By Gilles Rozier Haaretz 09 10 2011

How did the memory of the annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis become a torrent of bad taste?

There are some embarrassing images that never stop haunting us. The picture of battalions of Israeli high-school students marching along the paths at Auschwitz wrapped in Israeli flags is one of them. How did we wander this far off the path? How did the memory of the annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis become an outpouring of bad taste? It's very hard to be born and to live in the era that follows such a catastrophe. One tries to understand that which cannot be understood. Because a catastrophe by nature cannot be understood. Auschwitz was like a tsunami. In this case, historians like Raul Hilberg help us understand the process: How it happened, how it spread. In the case of a tsunami, the meteorology helps. But at the end, one question remains: How could it happen? What better tragedy, in the Greek sense of the word, than that genocide? After all it contains everything that is titillating: sadism, death, blood, fire, fate. No wonder, then, that the catastrophe and its memorialization have enticed every possible immorality - precisely in the place where there ought to be modesty.

In the mid-1990s, when the possibility of a supermarket opening at the entrance to Auschwitz made headlines, there was such a hue and cry that the plan was dropped. But the supermarket was merely a symptom of a more serious problem: the fact that the Auschwitz camp had become one of the top tourist destinations in the world. A tourist snaps pictures, answers his mobile phone, takes a leak, eats a sandwich, buys postcards and souvenirs. In this regard, I sometimes wonder why something that was untenable at Auschwitz shocked nobody at Yad Vashem; after all, at the souvenir shop there you can buy not only books about the Holocaust, but also prayer shawls and mezuzahs.

But the shop at Yad Vashem is only the prelude to the wandering. There are other examples, which provoke laughter or, alternatively, tears. And perhaps it is indeed better, as the Yiddish expression goes, to "laugh with lizards" (lakhn mit yashtherkes) than to weep bitterly.

The new technologies offer us many opportunities to laugh or to cry. Thus it happened that when I logged onto Facebook one day, I received the following notification from my friend Laurence: "Laurence S. likes the Auschwitz Holocaust Museum." The Holocaust memorial in Paris is the center that houses the archive of material on the annihilation of French Jewry. Its website enables visitors to search for precious documents. There I found, among other things, my grandfather's selection certificate from the Bonne-La-Rolande camp and his certificate of deportation to Auschwitz, on June 30, 1942. Like the online shop Amazon, which offers you a "shopping cart" for storing your purchases until checkout - the memorial's website offers a similar option via what is called "my selection."

Sometimes conversations with people also give rise to absurd situations. After it emerged that we have an acquaintance in common, my friend Nicole announced: "I know Stephane. We were at Auschwitz together." She meant, of course, a trip that had taken place the previous week. There was another friend of mine who, when I asked where he had got such a deep tan, replied, "At Auschwitz" - where he had been on a particularly sunny day. Yet another friend, the director of a Jewish library in Paris, received a call one day from the French Holocaust memorial fund, and heard the secretary announce when he picked up the phone: "Holocaust on the line."

Another example, this one from the publishing field: A lavish edition of Julian Tuwim's book of poetry, "We, Polish Jews" (written in the United States in 1944), recently came out in Warsaw in four languages: Polish, English, Hebrew and Yiddish. What makes it lavish? On the bottom right-hand cover of the cloth-bound, hardcover edition of the book, we are privileged to receive a small transparent pouch containing a bit of dirt from Warsaw's Umschlagplatz (deportation square).

The cinema has also yielded several black pearls recently. The film "La Rafle" (The Round Up), from 2010, presented with the help of melodramatic effects the round-up of Jews at the Vel' d'Hiv on July 16 and 17, 1942; over the course of those days, more than 13,000 Parisian Jews were arrested and held in the city's winter stadium until they were deported to Auschwitz. The

filmmakers later recounted: "There were loads of extras, more than 10,000 people, almost like the number of people who were gathered at the time."

Then there is "Anne Frank: The Musical." The posters for this musical comedy, which featured a portrait of Anne Frank, blanketed the walls of Paris buildings in 2009. The producers of this play, which feels as if it were tailored for Broadway, enlisted a rap singer to narrate the drama of Anne Frank, ostensibly with the desire of "reaching the younger generation." As though it were not enough to stick to "The Diary of a Young Girl," which remains a global best-seller more than 60 years after it first appeared.

The most glorious expression of wandering far off track is indubitably reserved for a particular initiative on the part of the Auschwitz museum. A few months ago I found a collection of postcards that were put out by that museum - without dates. The postcards are all in the sticky-sweet style of photographer David Hamilton, and show the crematoria against a backdrop of a sunset or red roses on barbed-wire fences. On top of all this, the name "Auschwitz-Birkenau" appears at the bottom of the picture in bold Gothic letters.

In the late-19th century, more than 200 books were written in France about the misery and exploitation of young people who worked in the mines of northern France. Only one became an inalienable asset for future generations: Emile Zola's masterpiece "Germinal." If I may try and predict the future, the same will happen in the case of the annihilation of European Jewry. The phenomena of bad taste for which our era has become the stage, will quickly disappear into history. In the meantime, there is nothing we can do but clench our teeth, and pray that no one feels the need to build a gas chamber reconstruction complete with actors playing Jewish victims - all in an attempt to pretend it is being done for future generations.

Gilles Rozier is a French writer and translator from Yiddish and Hebrew. His latest book, "D'un pays sans amour" ("From a Land Without Love"), was recently published by Grasset.