

## Telling the Story: Auschwitz Dec. 08

I heard Adam Gopnik speak recently at the Morgan Library where they have an exhibit of Babar the Elephant illustrations. If you have never read Babar, this story won't bring back scary memories. If you have read the Babar books, however, you will remember something that happens at the beginning of the first book. Babar's mother is shot dead by a hunter in vivid illustration. Gopnik, who has written about the Babar series for the New Yorker, said he took a survey of his friends on the Upper West Side and asked: when you are reading Babar aloud to your children and you get to the page where the hunter kills Babar's mother, do you read it or do you skip it? On the one hand, people don't want to traumatize their children; on the other hand, the rest of the story of Babar's life is incomplete unless you know that his mother is dead.

This story made me think about how we decide what stories to tell our children and particularly how we decide what Jewish stories to tell. It brought me back to a conversation I once had with a speaker who had spoken here for Kristallnacht. She was a Holocaust survivor who had spoken about her experiences as a hidden child. Afterwards when I thanked her, she said, "No, thank you. My Temple doesn't observe Kristallnacht because they say it gives the children a negative picture of Judaism. We've talked to them about it and explained our point of view, but they won't budge." This question often comes up surrounding teaching the Holocaust. How do we decide which stories to tell?

As an example of this conflict, I want to tell you a story I learned just last week. It is about a small town in Poland called Kazimierz and it is typical of the inconsistency of Jewish life in Europe. Kazimierz is part of Krakow today but was for 500 years the

separate district that housed Krakow's Jewish community. Jews had originally been invited to settle in Poland by King Kazimierz the Great after having been expelled from Western Europe. In 1335, King Kazimierz founded Kazimierz as an island town connected by bridge to Krakow proper. The old shores of an island in the Vistula River once defined its boundaries until the northern branch of the Vistula was filled in in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For years, Krakow was largely a German city while Kazimierz was a Polish city. In 1495, Jews were expelled from Krakow and moved into the eastern part of Kazimierz.

Kazimierz was one of the most influential towns in the Middle Ages. It was the center of Jewish life in Poland until 1651 when the town was hit by a plague and 4 years later when the Swedish invaded. In the wake of these disasters, most of the Jewish community moved to Warsaw. The town fell on hard times until Austria took control of the area in 1796. They ordered Krakow's Jewish community to move to Kazimierz once again. This move turned out to be good for Kazimierz and good for the Jewish community. Jews redeveloped the area. A famous Rabbi named Moses Isserles lived and taught there; he was known as the Remah and a synagogue was named for his family. His grave is right next to the synagogue and has become a popular site where Hasidim gather to pray. By 1910, the Jewish population of this small town had risen to 32,000. There were as many as 120 synagogues at one point. Before the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 and captured the city of Krakow on September 6, 1939, the Jewish population of Krakow numbered 68,482 and the district of Kazimierz was a vibrant center of Jewish life. The Jewish community of Krakow was forced into a ghetto area slightly south of Kazimierz. Jews who escaped joined the Polish Resistance. In 1943, the Nazis liquidated the ghetto

and deported the Jewish community to nearby Auschwitz and other camps. Only 2000 original residents survived the war. In 1946 and again in 1968, there was a wave of anti-Semitism throughout Poland, which caused most of the Jews to leave for Israel or the USA. By the 1980ies, the only Jews left in Krakow were mostly elderly people living in the dilapidated buildings in Kazimierz.

Is this story worth telling? This is a typical story of a Jewish community in Europe. It was secure, then it wasn't; it was safe, then beset by pogroms. It was a center of Jewish learning that contributed to the general culture of the area, and then it was destroyed. As if this up and down history were not enough, that is not the end of the story. There are two more parts to the story of post-war Kazimierz. For many years after the war and under communism, the Kazimierz district was a run down neighborhood that located elsewhere would've been called a slum. Today, it has been reconstructed and is filled with thriving art galleries, bistros and music. Part of this reconstruction was due to Steven Spielberg. This was the area where he chose to film Schindler's list. He actually reconstructed the old Jewish ghetto that had been south of Kazimierz in Kazimierz itself. I don't remember the movie well enough that I can tell you I recognized locations, but I am sure if I saw it again I would. In fact, you can take a tour that is called in the Footsteps of Schindler's List. It goes from Kazimierz to Auschwitz and Birkenau. The original factory that housed Oskar Schindler's workers is due to be reconstructed and opened in 2009. As a result of the movie and this rebuilding, there has been an influx of tourism into the area. You can walk on the cobblestone streets and see Jewish-style restaurants and Jewish bookstores. You can see the outside of the house where Helena Rubenstein was born. The wrought iron fence on the square has the shape of a 7 branched

menorah embedded in it. There are 7 synagogues open for tourism, two that function on a weekly basis for the elderly Jews who live there. There is a new museum of Jewish life in Kazimierz which describes itself like this: "We have divided the exhibition into five sections, corresponding to different ways in which the subject can be approached: sadness in confronting ruins; interest in the original culture; horror at the process of destruction; and recognition of the efforts to preserve the traces of memory. We end with a section showing some of the people who are involved, in different ways, with recreating and preserving the memory of the Polish Jewish past." Spielberg himself has made donations to the town to promote these kinds of remembrances.

And the second part to the modern story of Kazimierz is the annual Jewish Culture Festival held in June. I quote from its website:

"The First Jewish Culture Festival took place in 1988 and its program focused on a scholarly conference on the encounter between two cultures, Jewish and Polish... For over a week, Kazimierz resounds with synagogue song, klezmer music, and Hasidic, classical, and Jewish folk music. There are films, performances, presentations, and exhibitions to see and stories told by the Jews about their culture to listen to. In its present form, the Festival not only introduces the living Jewish tradition to a wide audience, but also offers a share of the joy in creating that tradition. Workshops in Hasidic dance and song, klezmology, Hebrew calligraphy, Jewish paper cutting and cooking, conducted by people from both Ashkenazy and Sephardic culture, attract numerous learners. Every year, the Festival puts on over 100 events featuring dozens of performers and thousands of participants from all over the world. During the most recent Festival, 13,000 people attended "

I haven't been to this festival, but I confess that there is something creepy about telling this story. How can there be a Jewish culture without Jews? The Jewish Culture Festival is a festival run by non-Jews primarily for the non-Jewish world. Even the bulk of the klezmer musicians aren't Jewish. The closest thing to a living Jewish community in Krakow is carved wooden Jews you can buy at tourist kiosks. And yet – this festival is an attempt to express the music of what once was a living Judaism. It doesn't present just the story of the death of Jews at Auschwitz; it also presents the story of the life of Jews in Kazimierz. It encourages the retelling of Jewish stories that otherwise would have been buried at Auschwitz. IN fact, there is 17<sup>th</sup> century legend I had heard before but hadn't been aware that it was set in Kazimierz until I read it again in a 17<sup>th</sup> century synagogue there:

"The founder of the synagogue is the hero of a well-known legend deriving from the Tales of 1001 Nights. Ayzik Jakubowicz, a pious but poor Jew, dreamed that there was treasure hidden under the old bridge in Prague. Without delay, he made his way there. On arrival, it turned out the bridge was guarded by a squad of soldiers and that digging was out of the question. Ayzik told the officer about his dream, promising him half of the booty. The officer retorted, "Only fools like Polish Jews can possibly believe in dreams. For several nights now I have been dreaming that in the Jewish town of Kazimierz there is hidden treasure in the oven of the home of the poor Jew Ayzik Jakubowicz. Do you think I am so stupid as to go all the way to Cracow and look for the house of this Isaac the son of Jacob?" Ayzik returned home immediately, took the oven apart, found the treasure and became rich. After this it was said: "There are some things which you can

look for the world over, only to find them in your own home. Before you realize this, however, you very often have to go on along journey and search far and wide.' " [3]

There are some stories you can only find in your own home, too. There is no one story that makes for a Jewish identity; it is always all the stories that add up to forming a whole person. That is why I think you have to tell all the Jewish stories. If you tell only the good Jewish stories, it is if you amputate part of your body; if you tell only the bad Jewish stories, you are depriving people of a vibrant and meaningful way of life. It his hard to tell the story of Jewish life in Kazimierz without experiencing conflict about what was lost. Yet the destruction, too, it is part of our story,

In the last year, I have learned a lot of Jewish stories I had never known. I haven't yet told you the story of Jews in Shanghai but I plan to. I did mention in my newsletter article this month that on our visit to Kazimierz we also went to Auschwitz. And I told you that there we saw two Israeli tourists wearing Israeli flags dragged over their shoulders like Superman capes. These images of Auschwitz stayed with me until we got back to Berlin. For a year, I have been agonizing over making a trip to Israel this February. I may have told you that the CCAR and the WRN are having a combined convention and a friend of mine Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus is being installed as the next CCAR president. It is an expensive trip especially since I've used up all my frequent flyer miles. It requires being away for 10 days. But somehow the visit to Auschwitz resolved my ambivalence about going. When we got off the night train from Krakow to Berlin and got back to Gideon's apartment, the first thing I did was to go on line and make my flight reservation. Because more important than deciding which stories to tell, how to tell them and why to tell them, is deciding which story to live.