

Holocaust survivors find rest as they bury their dead

By Lydia Strohl
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On a beautiful day in 1946, a funeral took place in Jerusalem. It was a solemn occasion, as funerals are wont to be; yet one small attendee could not understand why.

"How many were shot?" she demanded. She was told that only one was dead, and he had died a natural death. This puzzled the child.

"That's wonderful. Why isn't everybody happy? Why is everybody so upset if there is just one dead Jew and so many living Jews carrying the coffin?" she asked.

The girl had come out of Europe, via Egypt. She had spent years in a cave under a pigsty, hiding from the Nazis and their death camps. In her short life she had encountered much death. Death she equated with mass murder.

That child was Yaffa Eliach, professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Jerusalem, who on Thursday conveyed to an audience the legacy of mass murder, and the continuing quest of Holocaust survivors to bury their dead.

"Most of the 6 million martyrs, if not all of them, do not have a grave," said Eliach. "We don't know where they were murdered, how they were murdered, and if they have a grave, most of their graves are

no longer in existence or not marked until recently.

"In a way, the Holocaust survivor is like a mythological survivor, carrying their dead with them in their empty arms, hoping, hoping, that perhaps they will find for them somewhere, someplace a perfect rest," Eliach said.

The depth of this tragedy can only be realized if one understands the inter-relationship between the shetl, the small Jewish town in Eastern Europe, and its cemetery.

The cemetery was a physical echo of the community, its monuments revealing the status, occupation, even gender of the deceased. The synagogue was closed at night to the living, that the dead might worship. Those about to be wed went to the graveyard and invited ancestors to join the celebration. Upon immigration, it was the custom to pose with ancestral tombstones, so that through photos, they would have a presence in the new home.

"Yaffa, you are a very lucky person," her friend Stella Wieseltier remarked at her father's funeral in 1983. "You will have a grave to go to. You will be able to mourn your father, and know he found the perfect rest. Do you know what a gift that is, for a Holocaust survivor?"



Photo by Debra Lustig

Ken Fradin ponders Yaffa Eliach's lecture: "It is a very painful expression that needs to be told, heard, understood and remembered."

Eliach did indeed know, and consequently dedicated years to the development of a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. The death camps themselves are ill-suited to this cause, as preservation of national pride has prevented the history told on the sites of the former camps, many of which are in Poland, to be told from the victim's perspective.

"It is very painful for the Holocaust survivor, who comes to Poland and is looking for the grave of his ancestors, who

would like to stand in Auschwitz and say a prayer, and somehow have some sort of communication with the dead," said Eliach.

At Auschwitz, one can visit a lake of ashes, see yards of human hair, turned grey over the years though so many of the victims were young, and piles of shoes. But nothing commemorates the dead. Even the barracks from which the dead last departed are neatly kept for tourists. In Russia, old Jewish cemeteries were erased, the

tombstones ground to pave the streets.

"If survivors could not bury their dead and find the perfect rest for them in Europe, where they were murdered, perhaps they will find the perfect rest here," Eliach said. That memorial, complete last fall, is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Eliach was a member of the 25-person committee appointed by President Carter to develop the memorial. "For the Holocaust survivors it meant that the President of the United States was giving us encouragement to search for that rest for our deceased ones. For many others it meant it will be a museum that will show what we are safeguarding here in the United States."

Ralph Applebaum and James Ingo Freed designed the Memorial. Freed, a Jew who escaped Germany before the Holocaust, reconstructed images of the escape route in the architecture. The red bricks are the same color, and the arches the same curvature, as those of Auschwitz. The foyer is open and noisy, like a train station. The bridges linking exhibit areas create a sense of confusion. The elevators accessing the exhibits are hermetically closed, to represent the ovens.

The exhibit itself shows the Holocaust from all aspects, developing the tragedy from the very seeds of anti-Semitism to

the depths of the annihilation and the bravery of those who resisted. There are authentic cattle cars, boats and barracks. There are piles of shoes, high heels and small patent leathers, showing how ill-prepared their owners were for deportation. They were brought from Auschwitz because all those that survived, Eliach said, had a good pair of shoes.

The majority of people who come to the museum are not Jewish. They come to learn, to try to understand what happened.

"The memorial has a different message than the death camp," Eliach said. "It says it happened *there* and we are going to make sure that we are not going to let it happen here."

But the memorial is not the "perfect rest" that the survivors are seeking.

"Survivors feel that the only resting place for their dead is a cemetery. They would like them to be buried in their shetl," Eliach said.

As a result, in Jewish cemeteries across this nation, monuments to Holocaust victims are appearing. And as the Holocaust survivors die, they are literally taking with them their dead, inscribing on their tombstones not only their own name but the names of their ancestors who are buried in mass graves in Europe. For many, only with their own death can they bury their beloved.