A JOURNEY THROUGH MEMORY

il filo della memoria
Photos by Alessia Schirripa and Fabio Carbone
A JOURNEY THROUGH MEMORY

Try to imagine: snowfields, deathly silence, a faint light that pierces the clouds, the cold that makes your breath heavier, the absence of the horizon and an overall atmosphere of death and desolation.

Here is Auschwitz / Birkenau.

The rigorous organization of the field and the extension of the Birkenau concentration camp shocked me really a lot; it was impossible to find the horizon in such an infinity of snowfields. In Birkenau any detail could give any force or hope to the deportees.

I already knew that millions of people were killed in death camps, but the information remained superficial.

I had different feelings when I saw thousands of shoes, pots and tons of human hair.

After having seen these rooms, the huge number of deaths became no longer an abstract symbol and the cruelty perpetrated in the Nazi camps was properly understood.

Finding myself in those places it was as reliving those moments and I was forced to believe, with enormous sadness that what I saw had really happened.

Primo Levi, who lived the experience of a concentration camp, gave us a message: only the memory can prevent it from happening again. The memory unifies who died and who survived at Auschwitz, it unites people of different nationalities, religions and political thoughts with the hope, unfortunately disappointed day by day, that Auschwitz will never happen again. That’s why it’s necessary to remember.

by Fabio Carbone
We were kicked and punched and put into a truck and brought to Milan Central Station. The city was deserted. The Milanese did not feel pity for us; they stood silent behind their windows.

I remember that the truck travelled along via Carducci, I was at the bottom and I caught a glimpse of my house for a moment at the junction with corso Magenta. Then the truck went across the city, took the underpass in via Ferrante Aporti and we ended up in the basement of the station, PLATFORM 21[...]. None of us knew these undergrounds, that black belly of the Central Station, now place of memory, thousands of people left from those tracks and never came back.

I remember Mr. Silvera, he stood in the middle of the vagon with other pious men, he put the tallet (the ritual robe) over his shoulders and prayed[...]. Violet and I looked at each other, we had no hopes. Thousands, even millions of times I have wondered why I survived the Holocaust. But there is no answer. I always envied those who arrived at Auschwitz alone, those [...] who did not experience the agony of the loss of parents, sons, brothers. We will all die, but if someone comes back and tells about our experience, no one will believe him.

LILIANA SEGRE
You who live safe
in your warm houses,
you who find warm food and friendly faces
when you return home in the evening:
consider if this is a man
who works in the mud
who knows no peace
who fights for a crust of bread
who dies for a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
without hair, without name,
without the strength to remember
empty are her eyes, cold her womb,
like a frog in winter.

Never forget that this has happened:
remember these words.
Engrave them in your hearts
when at home or in the street,
when lying down, when getting up.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your houses be destroyed,
may illness strike you down,
may your offspring turn their faces from you.

If this is a man, Primo Levi
As soon as I was released I just felt an inexpressible need of love, a need to understand and give, as I am now doing with you today.
In a few years there will be no more people who will bring you this jacket or will give you their own evidence. Despite that desperate suffering, those aberrant conditions, when we left the camp we had a great need of love, a great need to return to be what we had been, but dramatically it was no more possible because we could not be the same people we had been once.
I’ll tell you about it by using words taken from a letter of people sentenced to death during the Resistance: “How hard it is to say goodbye forever to the beauty of life! Even if the sky was made of paper and the world oceans were full of ink, it would not be sufficient to write my pain, to describe what was happening around me”.
This is the great drama of exile: seeing that the language is no longer sufficient to describe those aberrant conditions and make that world perceptible, tangible.
First of all they came to take the gypsies.
And I was happy because they stole.
Then they came for the Jews.
And I said nothing because they were unpleasant.
Then they came for the homosexuals, and I was relieved, because they were irritating.
Then they came for the Communists, and I did not say anything, because I was not a Communist.
One day they came for me, and nobody was there to raise any objection.
The volatility of the memory should be anchored firmly to the stones and to the chain. How can we remember when even the last word will be exhausted by the crying over all the horrors of the Shoah will be finally gone to have a rest among the millions of man’s dreams of women who could not dream and only these stones of the platform 21 will remain the tools of the wagon and the other jobs as usual silent witnesses of the madness of reason.

GIORGIO BAGNOBIANCHI
Almost all veterans, in their speeches or in their written memories, remember a nightmare which recurred frequently during their nights of imprisonment. The dream had lots of details, but it was unique in its essence: the veterans dreamed that, when they would be back at home, they would tell a dear person, with passion and relief, about the pain suffered, but this person wouldn't have believed them, not even listened to them. In the most typical (and cruel) cases, this person would have turned back and silently have gone away.

*The Drowned and the Saved, Primo Levi*
I will tell you about the crematoria, I won’t tell about the rations of bread, the ration of hunger. I will tell about the crematoria, whose existence almost no one ever mentions. At Auschwitz, the Jews were not just killed, but first they were asphyxiated and after that they were burnt.

Actually it was not so easy. Strangely, the architecture of this beautiful room recalled to me something dramatic: the roof with lights carved into the concrete ... Well, the slaughter began at the station with the selection, you’ve probably seen a lot of photographs, where men were divided from women, old from young. In good average, the 15 percent of the just arrived prisoners was saved, because they were considered by the doctors suitable for the camp work, and those who weren’t fit, were sent to the crematoria.

Then you may say: “But if they went to the crematorium calm and silent, they were idiots, bunglers, cowards”. How can they be otherwise defined? The answer is only one: no one knew that they were going to die.

No one knew of the existence of crematoria.

No one! When we saw them for the first time, we thought they were the chimneys of some factories, where we were supposed to work for the great Third Reich; instead they were the places where they burnt the corpses.
I died together with one hundred people, 
in the dust here in the wind,...
I died that I was just a child, 
and the wind will rest...
I went through the chimney 
and now I am in the wind... 
and now I am in the wind...
At Auschwitz there was the snow, 
the human beast is still not satisfied 
the smoke rose slowly 
with the blood
in the cold winter day 
and the wind still carries us
and now I am in the wind, 
and the wind still carries us...
now I am in the wind...
At Auschwitz, many people, 
I wonder when man will learn 
but only one great silence: 
to live without killing
it's strange I still cannot 
and the wind will rest
smile here in the wind, 
and the wind will rest...
smile here in the wind...
I wonder how a man can 
I wonder when man will learn 
kill his brother 
to live without killing
and yet we are millions 
and the wind will rest... 

Auschwitz. Francesco Guccini
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