

## In Auschwitz... Crying

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was in Auschwitz with Bill, standing in the rain. I had gotten to know Bill Glied over the previous ten days as part of the *March of the Living for Educators* program. On our travels together, Bill's abundant energy was contagious and I had to frequently remind myself that he was seventy-eight years old. From the way he interacted with teachers from across Canada it was obvious to me that he loved to discuss critical issues in today's world and to challenge people to think about their humanity. Up until this moment at Auschwitz, I had learned about his wife Marika, their three daughters, and his construction business. I had learned about his childhood in northeastern Yugoslavia, his Jewish upbringing, and his generous spirit. But then, as the heavens opened and fell down upon us at Auschwitz and we ran from the train tracks through puddles to a barrack, I learned about Bill's life as a Holocaust prisoner, about his strength as a survivor, and about his hope for our students.

I have come to think that Holocaust Education is much less about the staggering numbers of victims and much more about individual lives and responsibilities. Bill's accounts of his life during the Holocaust remind me of how we, as teachers, need to help students understand and reflect upon human behaviour

during the Holocaust — how we had (and have) the capacity for such cruelty. At the time of the Holocaust, human cruelty wasn't the exception — it was what mainstream society accepted. Canada's immigration policies before, during, and after the Second World War reflect how widespread this cruelty prevailed. It was human cruelty that took Bill from a small Yugoslavian town to the death centre of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. It was human cruelty that transported his family by train in a boxcar. It was human cruelty that separated him from his mother and sister upon arrival. And it was human cruelty that left him in the living conditions of the death centre of Auschwitz.

"All of us, including me, had only one thought in mind: How do I save myself?" Bill recounted. "After two months, even this becomes shadowed by another motivation: How will I get something to eat?" Bill described how prisoners had to divide one-kilo loaves of bread into twelve pieces to share. This involved multiple decisions among the prisoners: how the bread would be cut, who would cut it, and which spoon would be used. The ideal spoon would have been one that had an edge sharp enough to act like a knife so that the bread could be cut leaving the fewest number of crumbs on the table because crumbs would prompt disagreements among the prisoners. Bill



“If you are prepared to take a risk, you can save lives. We, us humans, have to take personal responsibility for what we do.... I will not abandon this idea; I will not let it die.... In spite of all the horror, life goes on. I have to speak up.”

explained that he was able to survive because he had his father with him. His dad would say, “I can’t eat this last piece of bread — do you want it?”

After a few weeks as a prisoner, Bill was moved from Auschwitz to Dachau, which was mostly a political prisoner centre and headquarters for labour “camps.” Bill was sent to a labour centre that his group built themselves: a dug ditch with a roof on top, earth piled on top of the roof, and inside, tree boughs on the floor for sleeping. Each day at four in the morning, the prisoners would stand in a square to be counted. Bill explained what he would do with his prisoner uniform when it rained and they were expected to stand outdoors for roll-call: he would take his shirt and roll it tightly and keep it under his arm, so that later there would at least be some of his uniform that would remain dry. After the roll-call, the prisoners were marched to a worksite by six o’clock where they were expected to build an underground airplane factory. Bill and his fellow prisoners would march to the factory through town day after day visible to the local people. No local ever smiled, acknowledged them, or threw them a piece of bread.

Bill’s task in the factory was to help create concrete for twelve hours a day. A human chain was used to transport bags of cement. His job required the use of a knife to slit the bags open and pour the cement into a funnel. This, despite the noise and dust, was considered a privileged job, especially for its opportunities: when distracted officials toured the facility, Bill could steal a cement bag and when you cut two holes in the bag, it could be worn under your shirt. This was a risk prisoners would take for additional warmth. For Bill, a cement bag could be traded for a slice of bread.

A routine inspection was used to determine if prisoners were fit for work: prisoners were expected to be able to walk up to a wooden chair and stand up on top of it. With 600-800 calories per day and twelve hour work days, this quickly became a problem for prisoners. If you could not stand up on the chair then you were sent to “sick camp.” No one ever came back from sick camp, often because of typhoid fever, dysentery, or tuberculosis. One day, a Sunday in the spring of 1945, Bill’s father couldn’t stand up on the chair. Bill was the next in line and he started to cry. He was fifteen years old.

In the spring of 1945, the prisoners could hear the guns of the allied forces approaching. Nine days before they were liberated Bill’s father died. Three days before liberation the prisoners were told that the camp would be burned and that they would be marched away from the camp. After the allied bombing and the defeat of the Nazi guards, Bill was taken to a German

hospital. He weighed 68 pounds. A month later, he was transported back to Serbia where he could find no family. Eventually, through the Red Cross, he was connected with his uncle in Canada.

What haunts me about Bill’s story is that well-educated people were responsible for the hatred that killed Bill’s mother and sister, his father, peers, neighbours, and community. Will our education system fail us again? What haunts Bill is the number of people who must have known about the death centres. In April, 1944 Jews were rounded up and marched to the centre of Bill’s town for deportation to Auschwitz; Bill remembers the townspeople who watched them march — throwing tomatoes, potatoes, and calling names. His former soccer team mates were there watching. Bill still wonders about the people who came from town to work at the death centres: when they went home for dinner, what did they say? Bill remains troubled by these questions: Why did no one help? Why did people not feel guilty? How can people think that obeying orders can be an excuse or absolution of guilt? For Bill, Holocaust Education is about individual lives, ethics, responsibilities, and decisions.

Although many of our schools in Nova Scotia integrate Holocaust Education into their current curriculum, I’ll be curiously watching the Toronto District School Board’s new implementation of a specific Grade 11 Genocide Curriculum this year. Regretfully, genocide and Holocaust education is needed in our schools to create citizens who will demand acts of humanity from our governments. For example, Bill Clinton’s National Security Advisor, Tony Lake, in response to why the US did not respond to the Tutsis massacre in Rwanda said, “Because the phones didn’t ring.” We cannot afford the risk of apathetic citizens.

Bill Glied left me with a strong message: “If you are prepared to take a risk, you can save lives. We, us humans, have to take personal responsibility for what we do.... I will not abandon this idea; I will not let it die.... In spite of all the horror, life goes on. I have to speak up.” Hearing Bill tell his story in a barrack at Auschwitz where he had been a prisoner made me want to hug him and tell him that everything will be okay in the future. His story will not be forgotten. Our capacity for both good and evil will not be overlooked. We, as teachers, have responsibilities. At the time, I didn’t tell him any of those things. Instead, I could only cry.

Dr. Steven Van Zoost is a teacher at Avon View High School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.