

## Reflections from Elizabeth Blum Savetsky's 2018 Heritage Trip to Poland

I just returned from a week-long trip to Poland to visit sites of my Jewish heritage and see the places where the horrors of the Holocaust occurred. I have two small children—Stella who is 5 and Juliet who is 3, so generally if I'm going to leave them for a week I would want to go lie on a beach or luxuriate in a spa. I'm sure y'all can relate. So why would I take a week off of my hectic life to go to Poland on an emotionally challenging pilgrimage? Let me explain.

Growing up as a Jewish girl in Fort Worth, I always felt different in a special way and proud of my heritage. I first learned about the Holocaust at age 8 in Sunday school in a lesson on Holocaust Remembrance Day. I was shocked, horrified, and confused. I became obsessed with learning about it and thirsty for any knowledge I could find. I read tons of books, watched every Blockbuster, and in my adult life, every documentary I could find on the subject.

Thank G-d, our Eastern European relatives escaped between the two wars, when antisemitism was on the rise. They got out in time. (Note, we later discovered from my grandmother Elsie Blum that indeed we did lose relatives in the Holocaust, including her Aunt Elke and Uncle Enoch. The family never talked about it.) When I was a little girl, I remember asking my dad if we had been in Europe before the Holocaust would we have tried to immigrate? He said, "Lizzy, you know we don't do change well in our family. We probably would have been in denial about what was about to happen and stayed with the comforts of our current lives." It's always easier to take what you know over what you don't. Thinking about this makes me realize the strength it took for my relatives and the others to leave behind everything they knew and come to America and start from scratch. That took a lot of guts and thank G-d they did it!

My husband's family wasn't as lucky. My husband Ira's maternal grandmother was an Auschwitz survivor. Her job at the camp was to sort clothing of those who had been murdered in the gas chambers. One day, she found her mother's monogrammed handkerchief and her father's clothes, and she knew they had been killed. She and her brother, Adolf ("Unkie"), were the only two who survived in their family. We never got to meet Ira's grandma because she died before he was born, but we thank G-d we had a very close relationship with Unkie who passed away just a couple of years ago. His funeral reawakened my obsession with the Holocaust. I want to share a letter I wrote to Ira last year on his birthday.

*Dearest Ira,*

*I'm feeling quite reflective on your birthday. Your existence is my miracle. When we were at the cemetery for your great uncle's funeral, we went to see your grandmother's headstone. On it was a list of her relatives who perished in the Holocaust—nearly everyone in her family. She came out of Auschwitz, weighing 72 pounds, and made her way to America. This was a miracle. She got a later start at family life but was able to have children in her 40's, even after the years of starvation—another miracle. Your*

*mother, her elder child, went on to have four children of her own. Your mother had her hands full with the first three, but your father somehow convinced her to have a fourth—you. My miracle. As we stood there that day at your grandmother's gravesite, I thanked her with my whole being, because without her will to survive, there would be no you. There would be no us. Life is a series of events that often seem random or left to chance. We can only control our reactions and choose our perspective. I choose to see the miracles. I am so grateful for every miraculous event that brought your being into this world and brought you into my life.*

*Lizzy*

When I realized the significance of Ira's grandmother's survival, and the miracle it is that my own children are here in this world, I felt a very strong pull to see with my own eyes what she had lived through. I want to do everything in my power to pass along her story and her resilience to my own children (her great grandchildren) now that she is no longer here. So, Ira's brother, Michael, and I decided to take this journey to Poland and into our past with a group of 25 Jewish adults.

The trip was exhausting both physically and emotionally. Each day was jam-packed with visits to cemeteries, museums, memorials, towns, ghettos, forests, and concentration camps. Our first stop was the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Walking through the massive cemetery was like taking a walk through history. We saw rows and rows and rows of elaborate headstones which represented the thriving community with well-respected leaders—the pre-Holocaust graves. And then we saw enormous, unmarked mass graves as far as our eyes could see—for the over 92,000 who had died while imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust.

Jewish life in Poland dated back over a thousand years, if you can believe it, and it was the center of Jewish culture and home to the largest Jewish population in the world—over 3 million. 90% of these 3 million were murdered in the Holocaust. That means one thousand years of life and culture were wiped out in less than 5 years by the Nazis. Currently in Poland there are between 10,000 and 20,000 Jews—we don't really know because a lot of the Jews don't know they are Jewish still because their parents and grandparents had concealed their identities to try to save their families' lives.

We hear these huge numbers.

- 3 million Polish Jews wiped out
- 6 million European Jews murdered
- 1.1 million Jews killed in Auschwitz
- 300,000 Jews gassed at the death camp Treblinka

The numbers go on and on. But how can we personally identify with an abstract statistic?

The European Jews were an educated, cultured, sophisticated group. They were doctors, professors, scientists, musicians, and artists. First, their jobs were taken from them as laws made it illegal for them to own businesses. Then their homes were taken from them as these

upstanding individuals were ripped from their houses and forced into ghettos with unlivable circumstances. Then their dignity was taken from them as they starved to death and beaten in the streets. And finally, their identities were taken from them as they were thrown into concentration camps or sent immediately to their deaths in gas chambers.

I think about the challenges I face as a mother on a daily basis. This week, for example, my daughters have been in swimming lessons every day. Because we live in NYC, they are hardly ever near a pool, so they are petrified. The swimming lessons are hard to bear because as any parent knows, nobody wants to see or hear their child suffer. But, nonetheless I force my children to take the lessons because I know it is critical for their safety to learn how to swim. This is a typical problem I face as a mother in my life.

Now I think about a mother in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941. She has 3 small children and critically ill parents, and they all live together in one tiny rat-infested room. Her entire family is starving to death. Their only hope of making it through the week is if she sends one of her children out to try to steal some extra food. She knows that child may lose his or her life in the process. How does she choose which child to send?

I think about the father in the Jewish Ghetto in Lodz. He has some connections with the corrupt man who runs the ghetto and makes the lists of which Jews will be evacuated from the ghetto and sent to their deaths in the gas chamber at Treblinka. The father finds out his 13-year-old son's name is on the list for the next death transport. Because of his connections, he is able to get his son's name removed, but he knows that another boy's name will take that place. If he saves his own son, someone else will die. These are the challenges parents faced during the Holocaust! Talk about a moral dilemma.

When I hear these stories, the statistics are no longer abstract. These were real people with real lives. And they were robbed of all normalcy!

What many people don't know is that the terrible journey didn't end for the European Jews after they were liberated. The few who survived returned home to try to find out if any of their loved ones survived and reclaim whatever homes or valuables they had tried to leave in the care of non-Jewish neighbors. What did they find? The neighbors, people they had known their whole lives, looked at them as if they had no idea who they were. Policeman and law enforcers would say, "You say this is your home, where are your papers to prove it??" The survivors of course had no papers—they had been in concentration camps—they didn't even have underwear or toilet paper! This is why almost all survivors fled Europe and immigrated to wherever they could get a visa as quickly as possible.

Ira's grandma and great uncle had a cousin in New York, so they landed there. Unkie wanted to become a doctor, but they told him he was too old to start down the road of college and then medical school and residency when he was just getting his grasp on the English language. He went to FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) and became a successful women's clothing designer. He married another Holocaust survivor, our great aunt Irene, who is still alive but suffers from dementia. Aunt Irene was 12 years old when she arrived at

Auschwitz. Her entire family was murdered; she was the sole survivor. When you look at Unkie and Aunt Irene's wedding album, the sense of loss is palpable. Both of them walked themselves down the aisle. They had no parents or grandparents. It is a generation of orphans. They never spoke about the war until much later in life and even then the words were few and far between.

Unkie introduced his sister, Ira's grandma, to one of the tailors that worked for him, and they were married. She was happy someone would marry her even though she was in her 40's. As I mentioned before, she went on to have Ira's mother, and another child, our Uncle Elliot.

It has been a couple of weeks since I returned from this trip. I've had some time to reflect on my takeaways. There are two major ones:

1. A generation will soon come of age never having heard a firsthand testimony from a Holocaust survivor—including my own children who are direct descendants of an Auschwitz survivor. If we don't learn from the past, we are in danger of seeing history repeat itself. We must teach our children the dangers of closed-mindedness and hatred. Before the age of three, a child has no concept of differences in humanity. Once they reach three, their brains begin to record messages like a tape recorder, and they can become socialized to embrace or to fear those who are different from themselves. Along with teaching open-mindedness to the next generations, we have a responsibility to pass on the stories of the survivors to preserve their legacy.
2. The topic of legacy brings me to my second takeaway. When I stood at Auschwitz staring at a room filled with hundreds of thousands of shoes of victims, I had a revelation. It didn't matter where the shoes walked from, how much they cost, how powerful the owner was or how religious the owner was. Everyone's shoes—and each and every item of material—was taken. Everyone died as an equal. They left nothing behind except a legacy. This is a good lesson for all of us. Our number one priority in life should be to create a legacy in the world with the morals and values we wish to encompass and train the next generation to perpetuate that. That is more valuable than any monetary legacy we hope to leave. When I think about Ira's 72-pound grandma coming to a foreign country with nothing, picking herself up, and building a life, I see a legacy of strength and resilience. I want my children to know what kind of people they come from and what they are made of. I want them to know that they have the power to get through any challenges life will hand them and the strength to make a mark on the world, perpetuating their family's legacy! Unkie's dying words were "I beat Hitler!" He did. They did. We did. My children's existence is a triumph. The legacy of those who survived, and those who did not, lives on within them. As our Rabbi on the trip said, "The Nazis tried to bury us, but they didn't realize we are seeds."

Elizabeth Blum Savetsky