

AUSCHWITZ UP THE BLOCK

By Michael Ventura

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We lived in a house once. When I was between the ages of 5 and 13, my family lived at seven addresses and I attended eight New York City schools.

Just one address was a house. It had too many doors, too many windows, too many closets, too many ways to get lost. An upstairs, a downstairs, a basement. Apartments were easy to understand, but for 7-year-old me that house was mysterious, somehow alive, and not on my side. It was the first entity I hated.

In that house I was often alone. Why? “Why is a crooked letter,” my mother said more than once. I’d be alone and where were my tiny siblings? And why did those bewildered people who were my parents seem daily more frightened? Not a question to be asked. When you are little and your parents are afraid, you’re scared to know why. The house was what it was and my aloneness in that house was what it was. Small children accept the situations they are given. Questions are asked much later, when answers may still matter but no longer apply. I was too little and the house was too big. There was something wrong about me being alone; there was something very wrong with my parents; but the wrongness seemed part of the house.

It happened rarely that I was alone at night, but it happened. One night, alone, I turned on the television. It was like no TV today. In a heavy dark wood cabinet was a screen maybe eight inches square. Fastened over the screen was an “enlarger.” Imagine a glass beach ball cut in two, one half filled, as I recall, with “mineral water” which widened and sort of bulged the black and white picture. I was told my mother’s brother designed the dial by which you changed channels, the dial on everybody’s TV! Unlike most of what I was told at the time, this turned out to be true. It didn’t make me proud. I disliked my uncle heartily. But it did mean that something of my family was in or of capital-T Television, and that was weird even then. As my mother would say, it was “funny-peculiar.”

That night the house, it seemed, presented to me a kind of ultimate vision, eloquent and exact, its meaning inescapable. On the bulgy, distorted, black- and-white screen I saw bulldozers push naked bodies into a pit.

I had never seen an adult naked. Yet here were naked people, their parts flopping about as they were dumped over the pit’s brim. I had never seen death and didn’t immediately understand I was seeing death, for the pitifully thin bodies moved as they were shoved in piles, many with open eyes, open mouths. Realizing they were dead was not a feeling or a thought but a sense of terrorized blankness that I remember all too vividly.

How long could that footage have continued? Moments? But really it was all I saw. I kept seeing it as the screen filled with other scenes.

I got the general drift of the narration. Families had been put into “concentration camps” (that repeated phrase stuck); this and that gruesome thing happened to them, even to the children; people who’d done nothing were murdered for nothing. The reasons were beyond me and that’s just as well because there could be no reason. My body’s shock knew that much.

No doubt the camps and their locations were named but I didn’t understand. For all I knew there was a camp like that up the block and around the corner and down a street I’d

not yet walked. Walking distance. It wasn't real to me that this happened seven or eight years ago – my lifetime! I was seeing it, so it was happening. Maybe that's where my family was.

They came back to the house a bit later. I was too frightened to ask where they'd been. Back then television didn't broadcast all night. Sometime after eleven the national anthem would play while a flag blew in the wind and fighter-jets flew this way and that, then a signal pattern filled the fuzzy screen 'til maybe seven in the morning. My family returned while I sat in front of the pattern. I asked no questions. No explanations were offered. A late supper was prepared. I didn't eat it and was chastised for not eating it.

I didn't understand and I don't understand.

I didn't see people calling themselves "Nazis" do horror to people calling themselves "Jews." Those designations meant little to me. I saw people doing horror to other people because -- why? Because they could? Why is, indeed, a crooked letter.

Without in the least minimizing the bottomless viciousness of European anti-Semitism, to confine what I'd seen to something the Nazis did to the Jews is to miss the larger fact that human beings do this to human beings. People regularly do this to other people who live down the block and across the street. Turks do it to Armenians. Americans do it to Lakota, Cherokee, Cheyenne and Apache. Spaniards and Portuguese do it Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas. Dutch and Belgians do it to Africans. Cambodia. The Balkans. Russian gulags. Rwanda. Since the 1990s millions, in the Congo have been murdered. One fine morning some people wake up and decide there's a reason that some other people are ripe for annihilation. Argue theories 'til you're breathless. Habitually, human beings behave this way. Which makes the concept that we are created in God's image just plain terrifying.

I don't and won't disbelieve in beauty because the world is such that beauty coexists with horror and neither has the power to eradicate the other.

To retain our humanity, we remember the unthinkable. There is nothing new to say about it but it must be remembered.

About a year ago a man I know, Michael Benavav, wrote a book about his grandparents called *Joshua and Isadora: A True Tale of Loss and Love in the Holocaust* (The Lyons Press), a clear and unsentimental proof of the realities of horror and of love, neither of which cancels out the other. The book impressed me. I wanted to write of it. Said I would. Didn't. Which isn't like me. Not until days ago did I realize what was in my way: that boy, that night, that house. I broke a promise because I did not want to go back there. I hadn't Benavav's courage.

His is a book about people, not numbers, but he supplies a few. "The unlucky Subcarpathians, along with thousands of local Ukrainian Jews, were ordered into a massive pit. The SS, standing on the rim, unleashed a thunderstorm of machine-gun fire.... Over a period of two days, more than 23,000 Jews were slaughtered." "In Odessa, tens of thousands were slain over the course of a week; 5,000 were hung in the city's main square."

In a shed where they are starving, the girl Isadora hides under piled straw upon which her mother Anna sits. An SS officer comes in, demands of Anna the whereabouts of her daughter. Anna Rosen denies she has a daughter.

"The German lunged forward and set upon the rag doll of a woman that lay before him. He yanked her up by her hair with such violence that clumps of it were torn from

her scalp, then beat her to the brink of death. She never betrayed her daughter. Isadora kept herself hidden long after the shed grew quiet. When she emerged from the straw, she found her mother a bruised and bloody mess, most of her teeth knocked out, raw bald patches on her head. ...Anna knew she was going to die. Before she lost consciousness for the last time, she told Isadora always to take care of Yisrael, and to be as good of a person as she could be, no matter what happened in the future.”

That shed, too, is anywhere. Up the block. Here. The worst and best of what we are. Anna Rosen knew how to face horror: Be as good of a person as you can be, no matter what.

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