

An Unexpected Reaction

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In October 2014, I traveled to Central Europe with my husband, his sister and her husband. Among the places we visited was Auschwitz – Birkenau. I wanted to go there because of my family's history but fully expected it would be a depressing experience. How could it be anything else?

I walked from the end of the train tracks into the camp and traversed the path my paternal grandparents took. I visited the barren sheds where people were housed in squalid conditions, saw the "muster platz" where roll call was held each day and the barbed wire fences, and viewed the crematorium. It is truly a terrifying place.

Yet despite the wretchedness of the site, I feel a sense of my family's ultimate triumph. Standing at the spot of Hitler's intended "Final Solution," I am proof of the endurance of the Jewish people. Hitler and his henchmen were defeated and died either by their own hands or by the decree of a tribunal. I am standing here representing not only myself but also my father's entire family: my children, as well as my aunts, uncles, cousins and their offspring.

We are the survivors who live to tell the story. My sense of victory is tinged with sadness thinking about the destruction of over 6 million people who wanted nothing more than to live their lives in peace and goodwill. I wonder about my grandparents, who were not granted this simple wish. I hope knowing all six of their children survived and have many descendants would give them a measure of satisfaction.



BACKGROUND

The 75th anniversary of Auschwitz was on January 27, 2020.

My father's parents (his father and stepmother) were arrested, deported to German-controlled France, and incarcerated in Gurs. My grandmother was permitted to work outside the camp, but my grandfather did not have this liberty. In 1942, the Germans began moving these starving and scared Jews east to Auschwitz - Birkenau. Page 39 of the transport list dated August 17, 1942 includes the names of Moritz and Margarete Oppenheimer, my father's parents. They were sent to Auschwitz - Birkenau and probably did not survive long. I know little about their short time in this place of misery.