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80 Years Later, Why Do We Still Talk About Auschwitz?



By His Eminence Metropolitan Cleopas of Sweden

On Monday, January 27, 2025, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew entrusted the task of representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp by Soviet forces on January 27, 1945, to His Grace Bishop Emmanuel of Christoupolis, Mr. George Pilihos, author of the study «Άουσβιτς: Έλληνες – Αριθμός Μελλοθανάτου»,"Auschwitz: Greeks – Number of Those Condemned to Die", and myself.

On this 80th anniversary, 50 survivors of the Holocaust, as well as Polish President Andrzej Duda, laid wreaths at the "Wall of Death," at the first Auschwitz camp, where thousands of Polish prisoners, Jews, and Soviet prisoners of war were shot. This was done in memory of the more than one million people who met a

martyrdom at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland, from 1940 to 1945, with over 66,000 Greeks among the victims. This ceremony also honored the memory of the total six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust survivors and Auschwitz Museum Director Piotr Cywinski expressed their concerns about the resurgence of extreme ideologies. “The Holocaust didn’t begin with Auschwitz; it first started with words, and it was nourished by the silence and indifference of society,” emphasized Eva Zepesi, a survivor, in her speech. She sent a powerful message to the younger generations to not let history repeat itself and warned about the dangers of rising antisemitism.

The ceremony began at 4:00 PM (local time) and lasted for over two hours, with 54 international delegations participating. Among the 2,700 people who paid tribute to the victims of Nazi atrocities, in a large heated tent set up over the “Gate of Death,” the historic entrance gate of Birkenau, were kings, heads of state, and religious leaders, including King Charles III of England, Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and Greek Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Anastasios Chatzivasileiou.

The camp was established in 1940 at the barracks of Oświęcim in occupied southern Poland, and its name was Germanized to Auschwitz by the Nazis. The first 728 Polish political prisoners arrived there on June 14 of the same year. Auschwitz was a complex of 30 concentration and extermination camps under the Nazi regime.

On January 27, 1945, the Red Army of the Soviets, advancing toward Germany, captured the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. This also revealed the tragic truth about the “Final Solution,” that is, the planned mass extermination methods of prisoners using gas chambers and crematoria.

The concentration camps were based on the central theory of the existence of inferior and superior humans, advocating for the removal of subhumans—such as the Jews, who were then labeled as such—from society. These camps stood in stark contrast to Christian morality and humanism, utterly disregarding Christian principles of equality and love for one’s fellow human, as exemplified in the Gospel passage from the Sunday of Judgment, which speaks of the despised and marginalized brethren.

On January 24, 1945, soldiers of the 322nd Rifle Division of the 60th Soviet Army opened the outer gate of the death camp, marked with the infamous slogan “ARBEIT MACHT FREI” (work sets you free). They were confronted by the horrifying sight of 7,000 surviving prisoners, who had been left in a state of extreme malnutrition. They were stunned by the scale of the horror they encountered.

The countdown to the final defeat of the Nazis had already begun. On January 17,

1945, as Soviet forces advanced, the SS forced 60,000 prisoners to embark on the “Death March” to other camps in the West, subjecting them to brutal death marches. Those who could not walk, due to their deteriorating health, were abandoned at the extermination camps to die from starvation and the cold.

From January 21 to 26, 1945, the Germans blew up the gas chambers and cremation furnaces at Birkenau and retreated.

In the past, I have dealt with the topic of the Holocaust through my participation with presentations/papers in three international conferences: a) by accompanying the Ecumenical Patriarch to Israel (December 2027), b) by representing His All-Holiness at the Athens conference, along with His Eminence Elder Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon (October 2015), and c) at the Rome conference (February 2020), highlighting the courageous stance of the Orthodox Church, which, through its heroic spiritual leaders and all of its clergy, resisted the deportations of Jews, saved many, and often shared the same fate with them—torture, exile, and executions.

A classic quote from Archbishop of Athens Damaskinos Papandreou remains: “I made the sign of the cross, spoke with God, and decided to save as many Jewish souls as I could, even if I risked my life… The Hierarchs of Greece, General Stroop, are not shot, they are hanged. I ask you to respect this tradition.”

Unfortunately, I had not previously had the opportunity to visit the sacred place of martyrdom where thousands of our fellow humans -Christians and Jews- met their end, to pay tribute to the victims of Nazi atrocities. This, however, was something I finally did on Monday, January 27, 2025.

The day of the camp’s liberation was declared by the United Nations as “Holocaust Remembrance Day.” This anniversary highlights the importance of historical memory and reflection, in a time when racism and fanaticism are still pressing issues. Humanity clearly does not learn from the trials of the past and forgets far too quickly, and when you forget, you are condemned to relive and mourn the same horrors!

On this occasion, I would like to briefly refer to the book “Night” by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, which is a painful autobiographical account of his survival as a teenager in Nazi death camps. It also eloquently raises philosophical and personal questions about what the Holocaust was and what its legacy is.

In his study, Elie Wiesel refers to the hanging of two adult Jews and a boy by the SS. To terrorize the prisoners, the SS forced them to march in front of the three victims. Although the two adults were already dead, the boy struggled for a long time before dying. This painful sight led one of the prisoners to cry out aloud: “For God’s sake, where is God?” Then, he heard an inner voice respond, “Here He is. He is hanging on these gallows.”

This raises the problem of theodicy. Why must the righteous suffer, while the wicked prosper? How can the existence of evil in the world be reconciled with the justice and mercy of God?

This question is raised by the Prophet Jeremiah and the Psalmist David as they address God, and the case of the righteous Job is perhaps the most representative example of theodicy. Job's faith is tested by divine permission; he endures the trials with patience, and his prayer is, "Blessed be the name of the Lord!" thus confirming the words of the Prophet Habakkuk: "The righteous shall live by faith."

Apostle Paul speaks of his personal experience when he says: "God has shown us apostles to be the last, as men sentenced to death, for we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are honored, but we are dishonored. To the present hour, we both hunger and thirst, and we are naked and beaten, and we have no certain dwelling place; and we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat." And "I take pleasure in weaknesses, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Christ's cry on the cross fulfills the prophecy of the 21st Messianic Psalm. This highest point of the Divine Kenosis, according to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, is the Sacrifice of the Cross, which is also called perfect abandonment and was expressed as the cry from the Cross.

"There is Auschwitz, so therefore there can be no God," said Primo Levi, an Italian-Jewish chemist, writer, and poet (1919–1987), a Holocaust survivor, in an interview with Ferdinando Camon (Ferdinando Camon, Conversations with Primo Levi).

"The trial of faith is therefore terribly harsh: I searched all day for an answer in the scabby earth and the ashes of the sky, seeking to find what connected the gas chambers to God." (Aaron Zeitlin (1898–1973), "Poems of the Holocaust and Poems of Faith")

The question of God's existence is raised by these writers, asking whether, in cases such as Auschwitz, God remains indifferent and apathetic, or perhaps has already died.

Indeed, God has died, but how? The death of God is experienced in the paradox of His Sacrifice on the Cross, in the Extreme Humiliation, in the Divine Passion, where we sing: "Your Cross, O Lord, is life and resurrection for Your people, and on it, we place our trust, praising You, the Crucified God, we pray to You: Have mercy on us."

Through the Divine Passion, the God-Man Lord shares in the suffering and trials of humanity. He suffers with those who suffer and, having risen, walks with Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus, assuring us that "Behold, I am with you all the

days, to the end of the ages.”

I conclude my thoughts by quoting the following excerpts from the speech of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, on January 27, 2025: “The Ecumenical Patriarchate is a living proof that different cultures and religions can coexist in solidarity and peace. This is our vision and our message. … We can offer renewed hope if all of us -political and religious leaders- work together for a common goal: to leave behind a better world for our children than the one we inherited or created. A world where conflict and war will not be the ways of resolving differences and divisions, where all religions and all peoples will be equally and indiscriminately respected, where people will have enough love as the mother tongue of all humanity, and where the diversity of nature will be protected.”

So, in response to the question of why, 80 years later, we still talk about Auschwitz, we answer: To keep our conscience awake and our historical memory alive, transforming suffering into solidarity, free from hatred, racism, and bigotry. We must adopt a stance of maturity and responsibility, not that of spiritually crippled people who have erased the word “remembrance” from their vocabulary, surrendered to the stupor of forgetfulness, indifferent spectators to the martyrdom and ashes of others.

Let us be guided towards the God-given gift of being created in “His likeness”!

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