



# The Banality of Memory

by Andrew Rusnak

**Holocaust survivor Joe Engel is the 2016 CCHA Southern Division's Distinguished Lifetime Humanities Educator/Advocate Award winner.**

*And something else, Daddy ...  
You promised to bring me books  
because truly, I have nothing to read.  
So, please, come tomorrow, right before dusk...*

—Your Faithful Son, Anonymous

—From “I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children’s Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944”

To write profiles is like being given a great gift. There’s something profound, intimidating, and even culpable about trust and the human condition when someone who barely knows you quickly opens up and discloses the intimate details of their personal and professional lives. To hear their stories is to accept the unsettling responsibility of a precious gift.

Two Jewish brothers who escaped France just prior to the Nazi invasion in 1941 is the closest I’ve ever come to writing a Holocaust story. Jacques and Jean Kohn made it to America and started a successful balsa business. Balsa is used for composite sandwich fabrication, for the manufacture of fiberglass boats. Jacques ran Baltek’s trim, sales, and distribution main office in New Jersey, while brother Jean managed the balsa farms in Ecuador.

Another great gift is raising our 10-year old son, Jake. My wife Lori and I believe in a balanced, experiential, and book-learned approach, one that promotes love, curiosity, imagination, passion for all disciplines, and confidence that the truth, whether cruel or kind, should always

be honestly delivered no matter how old our son, that postponing incipient awareness and understanding in order to safeguard verdant emotions can do more harm than good.

One of our big dilemmas lately is how to decide when is the best time to introduce our Legend of Zelda-playing, tablet-hoarding son to the Holocaust and other of history's genocidal afflictions. Jake is mature for his age, a hard-working honors student who yearns for scientific fact, attacks math problems with relish, pens his own poetry, and reads adventure tales like Ed Stafford's *Walking the Amazon*.

The horrors of the holocaust are simultaneously simple and complex. On its surface, it was nothing less than the state-sponsored, systematic murder of millions, mostly Jews (six million), but also several million Slavs and thousands of Roma (gypsies), homosexuals, Socialists, and the disabled.

Underneath, everything about the Holocaust is ineffable. To attempt to write about evil, "big evil," the perpetration of which was endorsed by so many, is to unwittingly yearn for the other side, to measure the myriad ironies that fold into contradictions, then to leave it behind,

wrapped in some measure of understanding. This too is paradox that circles back on itself, far more the exclusive province of those who experienced Holocaust, the Elie Wiesels, Viktor Frankls, and Primo Levis of the world.

That leaves others, me for instance, to struggle with an inescapable, self-conscious presumption that lurks near the doorway to every word and every description of every unimaginable wanton act of inhumanity. Albeit a sophomoric starting point, this insolent, paranoid fate is nothing compared to that surreal moment when Hannah Arendt's *banality of evil* is imminent, and you can do nothing but watch your own death unfold in front of you. The responsibility of the rest of us is to record and remember the best we can.

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“My father had two horses and a buggy,” Holocaust survivor Joe (born “Yossel”) Engel, now 90, told Michael Grossman in a 1997 recorded interview for the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston, SC.

“And my two older sisters, they opened a little store, a luncheonette, where they sold ice and candy,” Engel reflected later.

The ice, like many basic staples and accouterments in the small Polish town of Zakroczym, 40 kilometers northwest of Warsaw, was made by hand.

“We were poor, that’s what I remember,” Engel said. “We lived on Warsaw Street. We didn’t have indoor toilets or plumbing, no gas stoves. There were nine kids in two rooms and a kitchen.”

“We Remember Jewish Zakroczym.” The website claims the Jewish population in 1921, six years before Engel was born, numbered 1,865, about 38 percent, an active, enterprising, and resourceful community of tradesmen—cobblers, tailors, haberdashers, tinsmiths, kosher butchers,

and “hitelmachers” (hat makers). Around the busy marketplace in the center of town, there was a communal fusion of coronal sounds, truncated, almost un-aspirated hard consonant stops, and overall animated intonations and meanings, a very buoyant, flavorful blend of vigor, badinage, and anticipation.

“Actually, Yiddish ... it’s a mix,” Engel told Grossman. “Eastern Europe was so close, one country to another, we picked up some Polish, some Hungarian, some German. That was the language of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe.”

Estimated in the early 1900s to be near 3 million, Europe’s largest and most established Jewish body found refuge in the agrarian region. Long periods of tolerance and security vacillated, however, with each invasion of German or Russian armies. Mixed with comfort and security in the collective unconscious of what became the Polish Jews when the country achieved independence and regained sovereignty in 1918 was the zealotry and incoherence of Anti-Semitism, which ran hot below the surface of routine, everyday life. It was only a few years before, in 1915, when the Germans invaded Zakrocym and enforced economic restrictions on Jews. Acts of barbarism preceded German withdraw at the end of WWI when the army shelled the town.

After the “war to end all wars,” Yossel was born into the kind of impoverished but entrepreneurial promise of opportunity that can germinate in a stable existence. He attended Hebrew and Polish school. There were shtiebels, minyan houses on every corner. The Jewish merchants closed their shops every Friday afternoon to celebrate the Sabbath. Yossel played football in the streets with gentiles and the Jews were Polish citizens. “The buildings of Zakrocym belonged to the Jews, and the streets belonged to the Poles” went the saying.

“Anti-Semitism has been in Europe for hundreds of years,” Engel tells Grossman. “It didn’t develop in one night. They’ve been taught from one generation to another one, the Jews killed Jesus. With some people it does stay in their mind. With some people, they forget about it and go on their way. But Poland was constantly anti-Semitic.”

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Moishe Engel, Joe’s father, a religious man, harnessed the horses to the carriage and carted paying customers to and from the train station, a job he worked everyday until that fateful September, 1939, when the Polish Army requisitioned his horses.

“There wasn’t much warning,” Joe said, thinking back some 77 years. A month shy of his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, Engel could not have known the outcome, let alone do anything to avoid it. More than 90 percent of the Jews in Poland, close to 3 million, would perish in the Holocaust. Like most kids that age, Engel’s mind was more immediate, fixed on what was supposed to happen, or what he would like to happen, in the next moment. There was watching his father head off on his horse-drawn cart, asking his sisters for candy from the store, kicking the football around, cozing up to the wood-burning stove in the kitchen on cold winter nights, walking to school. To be Jewish meant certain rituals that gathered to form a sure culture, distinct from Catholic neighbors, but the real meaning of religion and how it would shape his identity, at 12, still needed to reify, from mundane, peripheral, myopic patterns to a solid, secure vision.



*Joe (front-left) and his family in Zakroczym, Poland (1938)*

With siblings and friends, carrying Polish text books, Yossel set out that day for the 15-minute walk to school. That night, like a swarm of omnivorous, rapacious locusts, the Wehrmacht began its mandate of blitzkrieg. Within days the German Luftwaffe destroyed the town of Zakroczym, heavily targeted due to its proximity to the Modlin Fortress. Young Engel found himself herded with thousands of Jews into the marketplace where days before he bought fish and vegetables. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish army, with its horse-drawn cannon, could not withstand the modern, industrial German war machine.

“They randomly took about 150 young boys from the group,” Engel says calmly, forcefully. “They point, you come out, you come out and they took them away and later you could hear the shots. They shot them to death in the forest.”

Surrounded by German soldiers in now-occupied Poland, a few weeks later the Engels push the family’s possessions loaded in the horseless cart three days and 25 miles to Warsaw where they hoped to connect with relatives who owned a box factory. “I had to become a man quickly,” Joe said, raising his voice for the entire world to hear.

**T**ucked neatly into the south side of Marion Square, in the disproportionate shadows of the towering, priapic monument to South Carolina native and U.S. Vice President John C. Calhoun, a strong guardian of slave-owning, plantation culture; across the street from a boutiquey Venezuelan restaurant; near decorated and festive Christmas trees that line Marion park’s pathways; under the ringing bells of St. Matthews Lutheran Church to the west; across from the quiet Thursday steps of Citadel Square Baptist to the east; parallel to the Old Citadel Military College (1822-1922), now an Embassy Suites that oversees the opposite side of the six-acre former parade ground; lies the Charleston, South Carolina Holocaust Memorial.

The context in this hipster, old guard-blend of manners and renovation gradually comes into focus. From a distance, the incongruity of Charleston is measured, symmetrical, cautiously pieced together with its protectionist histories and progressive pursuits. Up close, beyond the culturally-inspired ironies, these eclectic currents find a momentous, welcome synergy among the always-charming stone arches, long verandas, and congenial smiles that emanate from the passing vanguard of an ordinary day.

Holocaust memorials, if they work, push perception to stutter, interfere with diurnal habits like going for coffee, stopping at the grocery, picking up your kid from swim practice. Never again. If you sit next to one on a clear and unusually balmy day, intermittent doses of angst and anger should fall between stretches of sublime contemplation.

The cage, to trap or confine—a wild animal, prisoner, or criminal part of history. Twenty-five feet wide, 60 long. The bars rise to 17 feet, after which they open to the heavens. They are wide enough to squeeze through. Around the cage there are waxy-leaf trees and a sunken carpet of well-manicured lawn designed to study the spectacle in the cage, or for meditative prayer. After the conventional icons in the narrative of this Dixie park have been defamiliarized, this part of Marion Square is for slow contemplation.

Inside, the cage looks unfinished. A worker's discarded tarpaulin, crumpled, holding puddles of water becomes a 12-ft. bronzed tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, tassels or tzitzit attached to the corners, one missing, a custom for burial. Still, a pervading sense of the unfinished—to rupture sensibilities and expectations. The cage, to escape from, like an unjustly accused and targeted race of people. "I will remember the whole thing since 1939 till the day I die," Engel told Grossman before the memorial was ... finished. "I am going to stop by there. I always will see the gas chambers, the slaughters, the killing. It's not a good memory."

A plaque on the low, concrete wall offers some closure, exposes names of camps—Buchenwald, Dachau, Treblinka—vigorous-sounding orders with hard, guttural consonants, forever poisoned declarations synonymous with our basest instincts. Names of victims are nearby, those survivors who made it to the community of Charleston. I spot Joe Engel's name, Zakroczyrn, Poland.

On another plaque: *From 1939 until 1945, the ... Nazi regime in Germany implanted a racial theory declaring the German Aryan Race superior. [They] used this perverse theory ... to separate, imprison, and ultimately destroy millions of human beings.* This part of the park is for fortitude.

Just down the street, white supremacist Dylann Roof, "The Last Rhodesian" was found guilty of murdering eight parishioners and a senior pastor one night at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. He wanted to provoke a race war. Unseen, contingent, unfinished.

"Philosophy?" Jake asks before I turn out the light and he goes to sleep. I glance at the clock. Reading aloud for a few minutes has become somewhat of a ritual if we don't violate the nine-hours-of-sleep rule, which is often the case. I pick up David White's *Philosophy for Kids* and

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turn to Part One, which is devoted to values. Although sometimes Jake thinks he knows it all, I'm very happy my kid likes to think.

We read "Are You a Fair and Just Person?" which references Plato. White uses questions to set up hypothetical scenarios that help kids sort through ethical responses. One problem poses the dilemma of returning a borrowed weapon to someone who has since become mentally unstable. Should the weapon be returned if the person asks for it?

"No, I would ask for professional help first," Jake responds, opting for one of four choices.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because we don't know if the person will use the weapon to hurt someone."

I look at Jake who is roughly the same age as Joe Engel when the Germans invade Poland. Jake is not only a diligent student, he's a tough, flinty kid (father's bias), can crank out 25 pushups (father's training), and recently swam five miles nonstop to raise money for the National Kidney Foundation. At one point during the interview, Engel asks me if I can imagine a child watching his parents being rounded up from the ghetto and shipped to the concentration camp, to Auschwitz, seeing them for the last time, being loaded into cattle cars and certain death. I tell him I cannot. I can't imagine my son in that kind of survival mode. I do not think anyone who has never experienced it can truly imagine it either.

But witness and empathy are impossible without imagination, a surrender to a world without questions. In *Night*, when it was over, Elie Wiesel prayed to "the God within me that he will give me the strength to ask the right questions." We have to ask ourselves and of ourselves (declarations, today, short on resolve) to witness beyond the fixed, to court empathy, filter the spate of emotions that follow, and to act.

What is Jake's level of empathy? He doesn't like dogs, prefers cats. He cried the other day when he broke a coffee mug I brought him back from a trip. Sometimes he's too quick to apologize. And to the warm delight of teachers and no matter what classmates are standing around, he's never intimidated from shouting "I love you" to his mom when she drops him off at school. He sometimes assumes the unlikely worst when his core group breaks off and his mom and dad go to work.

White quotes Alexander Hamilton: "I think the first duty of society is justice."

"Is that true?" I ask Jake. I try to emphasize that to question, to find the next, right question, is more important than the discovery of ephemeral answers.

"Yes," he says, simply.

"What's the next important question?"

"Why are people unfair in a world that's supposed to be equal?"

It's a thoughtful, sensitive response, the kind one thinks parents like to hear. But I cannot help to also think it is weak and incomplete, especially when I imagine my son waving goodbye to his mother and father as they board a death train and the most important thing on their minds is the survival of their child.

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*Joe (front, third left, kneeling) and his soccer team in Salzheim D.P. camp (1946)*

Joe Engel meets me in the lobby of his red brick apartment complex next to the Charleston City Marina. He is short, wiry, exudes confidence, and it's unclear whether he really needs the walking cane. Around his neck, attached to a lanyard, is a conference badge that proclaims, 'Joe Engel, Holocaust Survivor.' He was recognized with the prestigious Distinguished Lifetime Humanities Educator/Advocate award at the recent Community College Humanities Association's (CCHA) Southern Division conference in Charleston.

Caught in an enchanting wake, with childish expectation I follow him to the elevator. In this moment I'm the luckiest person in the world to prospect the experience of someone who has witnessed and endured one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most defining, albeit horrific, moments, someone who, in the greatest survival tale of all time, has reached the other side of the darkest night. Never again echoes with reliability and assuredness.

Until I realize my imagination is overrun with naïve hero envy. Not that Joe Engel is not a hero. Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia—he's a hero not only because he survived Auschwitz, but *because* the world repeats itself, an uncomfortable, pernicious irony that pits hope and virtue against hate and fanaticism, all of which survived the Holocaust.

In 1971, literary critic and philosopher George Steiner, in *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture*, wrote, "... [T]he libraries, museums, theaters, universities, research centers, in and through which the transmission of the humanities and of the sciences mainly takes place, can prosper next to the concentration camps."

"What do you think of the world today?" I ask Engel.

"It's worse, look what's happening in Aleppo, to all those children who are trapped. Assad is evil. I thought that after Hitler, the world would become a better place, people would know how to care for each other, but in many ways, it's worse."

An estimated 70 million (some historians quote 60 million, some 80) died in WWII. Today, the U.N. estimates close to 66 million refugees and displaced persons are struggling to find

subsistence. Engel does not compare personal tragedies. It's dehumanizing. He's committed to the purest forms of imagination and understanding.

What can fathers tell their sons? That genocide and mass murder are aberrations that one day will be conquered like gonorrhea? That remembering carries no guarantees? That the world, no matter what, can fall into a malevolent vortex? "We never thought one human being could do to another one like that," Engel warned Grossman.

Did the fathers of Aleppo or like, say, the fathers of Charleston, Baltimore, or Kigali take for granted their sons' and daughters' safe passage to a secure future? Dead bodies discarded on the ghetto streets of Plonsk to decompose in the gutter, hundreds more dead bodies dangling from the electric fences on cold winter Auschwitz mornings left for all to see during appellplatz (roll call), Engel jumping from a train at 50 miles an hour and hiding from the SS all night in a snow bank. Could Moishele Engel prepare his son for this? Joe Engel doesn't really know how or why he survived. He does know that sometimes he had to load lots of dead, emaciated bodies onto trucks that carried them to the crematorium.

"[If] I saw somebody wore a good pair of pants, I used to go search the pockets," Engel told Grossman of his time in Birkenau. "Maybe he left some bread. If his pants ... was a better pair of pants that I did, I used to take it off. Shoes, Because you figured he was dead. Of course everybody was for himself. There was no friendship. I don't know why we were so selfish, because maybe each one thought he [was] going to survive. We were like animals in the woods."

Can depths of nihilism be quantified and added up like a math problem? Is the comprehension of survival in such chaos forever exiled to hypothetical chance? Is it human to ignore the inconceivable, to forget the results, to repress and replace? "Why are people unfair in a world that's supposed to be equal?" Where in the abyss does the appetite for death succumb to fatigue only to land on the randomly chosen side of hope? When do you decide to jump on the electric fence? When to jump from a speeding train?"

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When the Engels reach Warsaw, the city is ravaged. By the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, 1939, in operation "Wasswerkante," Luftwaffe bombers dropped more than 550 tons of explosives and 72 tons of incendiary bombs in what was up until then the largest air raid in history. An irrepressible hope in humankind guides a deracinated population, as if by shared instinct, to the place bombed the most. Engel asks me to imagine.

"We had to move everyday," he recalls. "We slept in churches, synagogues. Finding food was the worst part. We would check the abandoned houses to look for something to eat. We did not stay in Warsaw long, we gathered up our belongings and went to Plonsk."

Across the Vistula River, the Engels backtracked some 40 miles passing Zakroczym on the way to Plonsk. In the spring of '41, the Germans amassed 8,000 Jews, half of them refugees, into a ghetto there supervised by Heinrich Vogt, "the hangman from Plonsk." High fences, executions, starvation, typhus, lice, rats were eaten, marked daily life and death. The only "solution if you got sick was to die," Engel said.



By 1942 “the Germans decided the ghetto was too good for Jews,” Engel recalls. “They started to liquidate the camp. They made selections, they always made selections, the Germans asked the Judenrat, the Jewish police, to separate the people. They never kept the families together. First they took the older people, the parents, and took them to the railroad station. They pushed them into cattle cars and closed the doors, without food, without anything, and they shipped them off.”

No one knew where, Engel told Grossman, because no one returned. A few months would pass and another selection by the Judenrat sent the middle-aged and children to the train station. Engel watched his parents leave, then his nephews, sisters, brothers, and uncles before he was pushed into one of the last trains

with two of his remaining brothers, probably the final transport. Research indicates that 523 men who received numbers between 83912 and 84434 were on the last train out of Plonsk. Engel’s number was 84009, now faded on his arm, bleached by time and the warm South Carolina sun. There also were 257 women who survived.

When the doors opened after four days and nights with no food or water, he knew where he was. Only half of the estimated 2,000 Jews on the transport outlast the rhythmic precision of churning rods, wheels, flanges, track, perhaps the last sounds they heard, soothing reverberations to an unwelcome death. There were bodies everywhere. “You cannot forget,” Engel said.

And in the distance, over an iron gate in big German letters, an illusion for some, truth for others: “Arbreit macht frei.”

When you write a story about someone of whom much has already been written, recorded, even filmed, it presents a range of challenges because one, you’re late to the game and two, the hard lesson of how memory can be an unreliable phenomenon is a personal truth. I listen to Engel’s online interviews before I meet him. His voice and his persona match up. He speaks with conviction and urgency, asking me, several times, to imagine. I want to think it’s because he recognizes, in today’s culture, a dearth of sensitivity and compassion.



*Joe (right) and his brother in Zakroczym, Poland (1938)*

Engel has told the story probably thousands of times. For those who've heard it more than once, details swim in the cloudy water of memory. Sometimes new elements surface, to the delight of listeners. Joe returned my reminder of his temporary incarceration at the hands of Russian sympathizers at the end of the war with one of his signature smiles. He cornered and convinced a Jewish captain to let him go.

To tell his story, Engel regularly visits grade schools, high schools, and colleges. He is a local treasure. The city of Charleston named a street after Engel about a week before our interview. Joe is 90 and sometimes forgets. What happens, after almost eight decades, to the mnemonic details of those who've suffered great trauma? Tortured images of love, rage, remorse, sexual slavery, enmity, gratuitous murder, appeasement, hunger, panic, fever, emaciation, self-hatred, self-immolation, frenzy, and perverse release get rounded off into bigger, more accurate and louder truths.

When I got to Auschwitz and Birkenau the gas chambers were not finished yet," Engel tells Grossman. "So what they done, they dug holes, big holes, and when the people came, they forced them into the ditches with their kids. They took gasoline and sprayed it all over, and they took gas bombs, fire bombs, and threw them in. [E]very day in Auschwitz and Birkenau, between ten and fifteen thousand Jews used to come from Eastern Europe."

Despite his slight build and short stature ("I was a little fella"), the young Engel survived selection. He was deemed fit for labor.

Although Joseph Mengele had not yet arrived at Auschwitz, he quickly secured his reputation throughout the camp in 1943 as the Angel of Death.

"He [Mengele] used to tell them, leave your belongings, you're going to take a shower," Engel told Grossman. "And after you're going to be reunited with your family. Instead of opening the shower, they put in some gas. They used a special gas there, Zyklon-B."

With hundreds of victims, Engel waited naked in a slow-moving line for his head to be shaved and the numbers 84009 to be tattooed on his left forearm. This is what he told Grossman about what happened next:

I was in Birkenau. And Birkenau was the worst one. It was a slaughter-house. Anybody who could survive a month there in Birkenau maybe you could survive the rest of the time because it was so bad there. You've got no idea. It's unexplainable, and you cannot visualize actually what happened there in Birkenau. Nobody can even think of it, what actually happened. Kids were crying for their parents. They killed them alive. The mud was so high. We used to go pick up the dead ones, put them in one place. When the big trucks come, take them to the crematorium.

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*Joe (left) with a friend in Salzheim D.P. camp (c. 1945)*

Engel survived three months in Birkenau before being quarantined at Buna, an Auschwitz sub-camp. The Germans came in what was commonly thought of as a selection process for the gas chambers. They were looking for “young boys.” Engel took a chance and volunteered, winding up in “maurer schule,” a brick-laying school, in Auschwitz One, the main camp, where it was a bit cleaner, there were new clothes, a bit more food, and he got to work inside. He slept on the floor of Block Seven. All the barracks in Auschwitz were brick, Birkenau the barracks were wood, no heat, no showers.

Engel was there for a year before he was sent out into the cold to mix cement and build more barracks for prisoners and houses for Germans, the SS always watching, always flogging prisoners if they did not work fast or hard enough. His two brothers were selected to shave the hair of new prisoners arriving to the camp.

This is the first of several places during the interview where Engel uses the expression, “What did I have to lose?” For most of us who are not thinking of our lives when we use it, it’s a throw away comment. At the end of the kind of enervated life-or-death hopelessness Engel was feeling, there’s still a fork in the road. One path leads to certain death, self awareness of the end of self awareness. The other circles back toward hope, but it goes through unknown, precarious, all-but-impassable emotional terrain. With nothing left to lose, the two paths are indistinguishable. There are no choices, only lucky outcomes.

Engel also explores the existential idea that this turn of fortuity, volunteering for the unknown after the Blitz, after Plonsk, and after Auschwitz-Birkenau viciously cannibalized every sense of a normally grounded life, one he would have to totally relearn later after the relief of survival wore off, being chosen for something as random and simple as laying brick, not having to get in line for the gas chambers, is one of the main reasons he survived the concentration camp.

“Are those genuine?” Jake asks in a measured whisper. Mom, dad, and son stand in line for half an hour to get into the U.S. National Holocaust Memorial Museum and there are no other children. It is impossible to tell who is Jewish, who is Muslim, who is Christian, who voted for Clinton, who voted for Trump.

A young woman in front of us, alone, regretting the cold temperatures, pulls out papers with Hebrew script and begins to read while a young man comes through and announces that today at the museum there will be an opportunity to speak with a survivor from Nazi Germany on the fourth floor and a refugee from Syria on the second. Two male members of one large, smiling family behind us are dressed in camo jackets and hats. A sign outside asks everyone to think about what they see the next time they witness hatred, see injustice, or learn about genocide.

Inside the building, after the tight scrutiny of security screening, we are released into a bright, common space with lots of room to move about. There are few questions here except what’s behind the red-brick walls. There are pamphlets at the information desk. One is a “Family Guide: Age appropriate activities for visitors 8 and older.”

We grab an identification card, short bios on Holocaust victims, before we are herded into a large freight elevator and taken to the fourth floor where the exhibit begins. It is dark, cramped, and quiet as the herd moves slowly past the glassed exhibits. There are now kids in strollers, pubescents sans wide-eyed certainty, young boys and girls sporting high school regalia. There is silence, lassitude, a survivor’s focus, an aura of submission that captures our son. Jake slows, concentrates, reads the descriptions, softly asks questions, and then we come to the shoes where he stares for a long moment and asks his mom if they are “genuine.”

It’s a peculiar word, usurped by modern connotation to imply the upside of authenticity. I know, however, that our well-versed, overly-discoursed, fledgling ten-year old meant “real.” Are they real? Today he has on his new, orange, New Balance trail running shoes. They are very bright and real. There could not be a bigger contrast between our son’s kickers and the thousands of mostly dark-leather shoes taken from Holocaust victims that make up this exhibit. The shoes, bathed in an eerie blue light and displayed in two flat piles museum-goers walk through, are on loan from the State Museum of Majdanek, in Lublin Poland. Majdanek was a Nazi extermination camp responsible for 78,000 deaths.

Yet, the shoes are the same, they survived when the victims who wore them did not. Jake’s feet could fit in any number of shoes he was staring at. His New Balance trail running shoes, at size eight-and-a-half, might fit Naftali Bernstein, born 1909, the real person in Jake’s identification card. In the photo Bernstein appears a little like our son, with a serious, sideways look. He died from hunger at 35 in Wildlager, a work camp that was part of the Muhlendorf camp complex in Germany. He probably was allowed to keep his shoes for as long as they lasted.

The burden of Bernstein’s shoes, like Jake’s orange trail running shoes, is that they can be taken at any time by someone with enough power and hatred.

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We get off the elevator on the fifth floor and Engel invites me to sit down, anywhere he says as he motions to the living room. His apartment, part museum to his compelling history, part ... yes, still bachelor pad, overlooks the construction of a new children's hospital, which is the first thing he proudly points out.

The self-proclaimed "professional bachelor" has a bit of a latent swagger, a noticeable degree of non-toxic, "carnal" prowess. There's a 1946 photo of Engel, taken after the war in Germany at a Displaced Persons refugee camp. A buff, trim, intrepid young man of 19 with a full shock of dark wavy hair in a rebel pose, hand on hip, one foot up on the running board of a Mercedes convertible. He's wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeve pull over. Anyone might guess it to be early 50s Pasadena and not post-WWII Germany.

Above a neatly manicured soul patch, from time to time, to add enterprise to his story, Engel flashes an uncanny expression halfway between a grin and a smile. Luminous, a tad mischievous, its ubiquitous, transcendent powers gather all the emotions in a room and convert them to the idea that good can prevail over evil.

"When is the best time to introduce a child to the Holocaust?" I ask.

He thinks Jake is too young for the detailed horrors of the camps. He tells a modified version of his story to the many elementary school children he visits. I remind him that he was only 11 when the Germans ripped through Poland and that's when he tells me he had to learn to become a man very quickly. How much of our world is still uncertain and genocidal? It's not easy to admit I may want my son to grow up too quickly and, perhaps, that's an unfair consequence of some father-son relationships.

"We called it the death march," Engel remembers. "We marched all night long, for 24 hours in the snow. We wore wooden clogs and sometimes they would stick to the snow."

In January of '45, the Russian army was pushing the eastern front back across Poland, through German-occupied Czechoslovakia, and eventually on into East Germany. The SS feared the discovery of the camps and ordered the evacuation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

"Anyone who can't keep up, they put a bullet in his head and shot him to death," Engel said. "I saw this, people executed, laying in the snow." More than half of the camp's population died along the way, thousands of people.

*He looked up to the dark heavens  
from his position on the train and  
once again asked himself what he  
had to lose.*

For 48 hours they marched, through the snow, the bitter sub-freezing temperatures, until they reached a football stadium. Those who survived the night were loaded the next morning onto open cattle cars for transport through the southwest corner of Poland, through Czechoslovakia, into Germany, and, wishful on the part of the SS, toward cover-up of any testament to genocide. Guards were posted on every platform between cars, there was one only 10-feet away from where Engel was crushed against the side of the car and his fellow prisoners, many of whom dropped dead by the hour. He looked up to the dark heavens from his position on the train and once again asked himself what he had to lose.

"I told myself if I stayed here, I was not going to survive," Engel said. "If they catch and kill me, so what. I didn't have to suffer."





*Joe with the Mercedes (1946)*

The train rolled on at 50 miles per hour. Somewhere past the town of Gliwice, a few clicks beyond the Bohemian border, he scrambled up the wooden planks and jumped.

He landed in deep snow. The SS guard ordered the train to stop and searchlights scanned the heavy snow banks for more than an hour. The snow, too deep for a ground search, had cushioned his fall, insulated his body heat, and completely covered him for an estimated eight hours. Back in Auschwitz, Engel managed to barter a ski suit beneath his striped camp garb. When he dug himself out, it was pitch black.

“After about a day I found a forest,” Engel continues. “I got into the forest and I dug a foxhole with my own hands. Everything was frozen. It took me a couple days. I find some leaves to cover it. I lay in the foxhole but I need some water and food.”

With German troops on patrol and fearful, coerced citizens who would, to gain any favor, quickly turn a camp escapee, especially a Jew into authorities, Engel knew he could not hide for long. He hiked four-to-five miles until he stumbled upon a farm with several outbuildings.

“I stole some food, mostly canned goods,” Engel recalls. “And I did that for four or five days. By then the farmer knew something was going on, but I had no choice. Then I build up some spirit and I went to the farmer to tell him who I am, I escaped from the camp. I took a big chance because he could’ve gone to the SS.”

The farmer was kind. He pointed west and told Engel there was a resistance group eight-to-ten kilometers up the road and that he should join. The farmer even introduced him to the captain, but the Slovak fighters were hesitant, weary of newcomers.

“I was lucky he took me in,” Engel smiles. “At night if a German train came by we would shoot it up. We’d go to the police stations and shoot them up.”

Until the Russian liberation, a few weeks later, Joe Engel was a resistance fighter.

“In my nomination I wrote that we should give you an award because you epitomize all that we teach in the humanities, and because you are a local treasure. We are lucky to have you in our community, and you have done so much to educate people of all ages of the need to stand up against bigotry and intolerance.”

Professor Pepe Zerda of Charleston’s Trident Technical College informed Engel with these words of his intention to nominate him for the CCHA’s Distinguished Lifetime Humanities Educator/Advocate award.

What do we remember? What do we forget? How do we remember? How do we forget? We remember the picture of one child suffering, psychologists tell us, before we remember the picture of many children suffering. Engel remembers every Friday afternoon in Auschwitz, when for fun, before the Jewish Sabbath, the SS hanged two young Jewish boys for everyone to see.

“I don’t know how I survived because I was a young fella,” Engel says. “How do I survive Auschwitz-Birkenau? In the camp, we didn’t believe in nothing, in any God, nobody believes. If he could see how his people were murdered, how they were punished for what they are. There were rabbis and priests, and they absolutely didn’t believe in anything. There were no miracles.”

Engel, two of his brothers, and one sister survived. Joe came to America, started and successfully ran a dry clean business for 37 years on King Street in Charleston. “Anyone who doesn’t believe in miracles is not a realist,” said Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion.

*“The Holocaust is a tragic and unfinished story, always unfinished, best told by those who survived, but told nonetheless. . .”*

“I had to take off my shirt a couple times a day to shake out the lice,” Engel recalls. “In Birkenau you’d wake up in a dead man’s urine.” The story disrupts, threatens, resonates in its reality and miracle. I hope Jake will remember every detail and understand the value and imagination in my apology. The Holocaust is a tragic and unfinished story, always unfinished, best told by those who survived, but told nonetheless.

“That’s my biggest wish,” Engel told Grossman of the Holocaust Memorial in Charleston. “Schools can go there to explain ... what happened to a million, small, innocent children [who] got slaughtered to death because of their religion.”

Thanks go to Trident Technical College Professors Pepe Zerda and Nicholas Rummell, and Dr. Michael Engel for their assistance with this story.

*Joe (right) with his sister,  
Irene Zryb, and uncle,  
Shlomo Zylberstin.  
Natanya, Israel (1970)*



*Joe, family, and neighbors  
one month after liberation  
(1945)*

*Joe (front left) and family  
before the war (1938)*

