

Holocaust memorials become kitsch Auschwitzland

By MICHAEL SLADEK
Special to the IJN

The summer of 1994 has marked one of the largest influxes of tourists to Eastern Europe since the fall of Communism in the late 1980's. The actual number of visitors may not compare to those visiting the other major tourist centers of Europe, but in an area where tourism was practically unheard of just a few years ago, the onslaught is significant. The welcome mats have been put out and local governments, businesses, and tourist draws are getting crash courses in capitalism.

The result is a battle between the past and the present, between culture and commerce, between integrity and necessity. At the center of this battle is the Jewish history of these areas, and the tiny Jewish communities still existing throughout Eastern Europe.

My own trip to Eastern Europe began in Warsaw, Poland. Warsaw once boasted a large, thriving Jewish community with many synagogues and a large cemetery. The biggest draw for Jewish-related tours however, is the former sight of the Warsaw Ghetto. Beginning with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Monument, one follows a route of markers which lead to major points of interest such as the former uprising command post at Mila 18, and to the sight of roundups and battles.

The former Ghetto area is a place of ghosts and bitter history, and one should be able to go there and mourn the loss of 500,000 lives in peace and respect. However, capitalism's necessary birth in the area is making that very thing next to impossible to do during tourist season. Along with capitalism and tourism, budding entrepreneurs have moved in to make a quick few thousand zloty off what has turned out to be a lucrative commodity; namely the Holocaust.

When I visited the Monument there were two stands at its base. On sale were books, postcards, and other souvenirs relating to the ghetto, the death camps, Nazis, and the war. A group of Jewish-American tourists, some with kipot, happened to be there and were hungrily browsing and purchasing. I picked up a coffee table book of a pictorial account of the Ghetto. As I leafed through, I was suddenly given a sales pitch: "Pictures of the Warsaw Ghetto," the vendor began as he reached over to flip pages for me; "Jews in the Ghetto. Umschlagplatz. Dead bodies in the Ghetto. Dead bodies in the ghetto. More dead bodies in the ghetto."

It was a disgusting feeling to be staring at the naked, contorted bodies of men, women and children while being forced to listen to a sales pitch which pushed them like they were used cars. Even more shameful than the vendors however, are the tourists who buy, and thus validate the existence of salesmen such as the one I encountered.

Stands similar to those in Warsaw can be found at the Auschwitz death camp, an hour's drive from Krakow. These stands dot the barbed wire entrance to the largest camp for the extermination of people the world has ever seen. Coming upon this summertime tourist mecca, one must walk past lawns filled with lurching tour groups and a parking lot filled with buses. At the visitors entrance is a bookstore, an office to exchange currency, a post office, and even a small cafeteria. The camp entrance itself surged with waves of tourists, some who stopped under the "Arbeit Macht Frei" sign to smile for family snapshots. It was odd watching these groups who

might as well have been at the Grand Canyon rather than a notorious place of mass murder. Inside, visitors filed in and out of the crematorium and

Auschwitz is the Grand Canyon of the death camp tourist world. Madjanek is the Royal Gorge. To the tourist interested only in a quick fix

ing the summer, tourism takes over the city. Prices rise during the high season to the point where locals cannot dine in their own restaura-

these economies, may at the same time be cutting out the heart of Eastern Europe to take home as a souvenir.

The problem is the same for all aspects of Eastern European culture: everything is becoming pre-packaged for consumption by the West. The death of respect and culture in Eastern Europe is as much the fault of tourism and Westernization, as suppression and bastardization of culture was the fault of Communism.

The Czech writer Milan Kundera once wrote that "in the sunset of dissolution everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine." One hundred years from now it is probable that the Holocaust will be remembered quite differently, and in a way, it will be permitted.

Distance has a way of dulling our senses and our judgement. The problem for us is that the Holocaust, and its subsequent destruction of ancient communities, took place only 50 years ago. Its survivors are our grandparents and parents, many of whom still suffer from their experiences. Of course there are many places such as Presov and Madjanek where the past is being preserved in a dignified manner.

Still, there are others such as the town of Mikulov, in the Czech Republic, whose largely forgotten Jewish past is slowly disappearing behind weeds and trees, in silent death. But in places such as Warsaw, Auschwitz, and Prague people are turning recent history into kitsch, and kitsch is the essence of nostalgia and the validation of past and present wrongs.

The first question one must ask is whether a stultid death, as in Mikulov, is more noble than a blasphemous, kitsch-filled life?

The second question should then be: why must we choose between the lesser of these two evils? Why can't we preserve the past as it is being preserved in Presov; in such a way that insulting kitsch is held off for as long as possible, and real, emotional memorials are not allowed to die?

Basically, it comes down to two things: how we spend our money and how we behave ourselves. By running to buy from peddlers of our people's deaths, we validate the peddler's existence and inadvertently excuse the murders. If we can simply control our need to purchase souvenirs everywhere we go, we soon will make commercialization of the Holocaust impossible on that level. By looking at the world of our ancestors only through the eye of a camcorder, we blind ourselves to them.

If we can learn to simply experience something for its own sake, rather than record and bustle through that experience, we become more than tourists; we become a link. By allowing the Holocaust to become a commodity, we are killing Hitler's victims a second time, and we shame those who came before us. If we shame the past we shame ourselves one hundred times over, and the lessons of the Holocaust will become increasingly more vague, watered down and meaningless to each generation which follows.

Finally it is up to us, those who travel to these places, those who care enough to show an interest. We must set an example of decency in the face of commercialization. We must learn about the past, preserve the past, and place ourselves in the roles of human links in this fading history which deserves our respect as well as our zealous interest.

Michael Sladek is a former Denverite now residing in California.



Tourists crowd through the Jewish cemetery in Prague

Photo: Michael Sladek

gas chambers with their camcorders running, stopping to pose in front of the ovens for more snapshots.

If the Holocaust had occurred one hundred or more years ago, the behavior I witnessed at Auschwitz might be excused. But it didn't. Fifty years ago is not long enough for an event as horrific as the murder of millions of innocents to become as kitschy as any other tourist trap. As sick as it sounds, Hitler's dream of one day building a museum dedicated to the extinct Jewish people, seems to actually exist within the most notorious of the machines used for their extermination. The only difference is that the Jews are not extinct. In fact, they are helping to support what I now call "Auschwitzland" in its present form, as a tourist hub for those who want quick-fix history, merchandise, and a candy bar.

In stark contrast to "Auschwitzland" are some of the other, less popular, death camps such as Madjanek which lies on the outskirts of Lublin.

I spent a long day at Madjanek. It was a weekend. It was July, the peak of the tourist season. Besides myself, there were only a handful of other visitors.

The remaining gas chambers were silent and eerie with their zyklon B bluish tints. Storehouses were filled with the belongings of victims, including massive mounds of rotting shoes. These mounds could be touched, smelt, and connected with as tangible realities. Each shoe is a foot, each foot a person.

A few of the prisoners barracks were open and one could enter and again sense, rather than simply view, a minuscule segment of how people lived and how they died. Flocks of ravens lighted poplar trees as I entered the crematorium in silence to pay respects and to feel in the quiet, horrible building. There were no bookstands at Madjanek, no bustling crowds, no Kodak moments.

There is a visitors center for those who wish, but one is not forced to go through a gamut of visitor information, merchandising, and overbearing tourist trap accouterments. Madjanek is not Auschwitz.

of history, or simply in being able to say "I've been there", the Grand Canyon is more impressive than the Royal Gorge.

Thus, the average tourist goes out of their way to see Auschwitz, whereas Madjanek is not as worthy. Those who run Auschwitz in its present form cater to visitors on the visitors level, and in doing so remove the dignity, emotion and true horror of the place. Madjanek, and other less touristy camps remain as quiet, stark testaments to the dead.

My trip to the east was partially motivated by a need to search out my own family history. My father is a Holocaust survivor from the town of Presov, Slovakia, one of the largest towns in the country which ones had a thriving Jewish community.

I managed to find apartments, old storefronts, and grave sites of my family as well as the Orthodox synagogue in which my great grandparents once held seats. The synagogue itself was surprisingly the most beautiful of all I had seen, and was to see on the entire trip. The place is impeccably organized with a staff, a museum, and reconstruction project all funded through the national government and private donations.

Unfortunately, however, the Jewish community in Presov is quickly shrinking like most Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. I visited the synagogue a few times during my stay, which was once again in July, at the peak of tourist season. I saw no one besides the locals. Perhaps it is the absence of tourists which allows the quiet grandeur of Presov and it's magnificent synagogue to survive in dignity.

My two and a half month long trip saw its last leg in one of Europe's most striking cities. Prague is truly as amazing as everyone says. One cannot walk two blocks without being struck by some architecture or statue that makes ones eyes pop out. This fact, and the undercurrent of energetic life and history in Prague has, unfortunately, become a double edged sword for the Czech Republic's capital. Dur-

McDonald's is everywhere. The streets are jammed with camera toting foreigners, and culture is squeezed into a fast food-like mix.

The so-called Jewish Ghetto has been turned into a tourist trap of epic proportions, and Franz Kafka (Jewish and native of Prague) has become a Mickey Mouse-like figure used to lure people to the area. Apparently the lure works.

Jewish points of interest were packed full when I visited. Groups milled around outside the Old-New Synagogue, the oldest in Europe, talking and snapping pictures. A relatively steep fee was charged to enter the medieval building with hordes of others. Inside, cameras flashed and camcorders rolled. It seemed that only a few people were actually viewing the place with their own eyes, rather than through some kind of lens in a frenzy to record.

A block away are two other synagogues, a museum, and the old cemetery. After purchasing yet another ticket, I was allowed in to see these sights. The museum was so packed I decided to pass on it, the cemetery was backed up, roped off, and camcordered to the point of insanity. When I could avoid the presence of these pushing groups, I was able to view some of the most magnificent headstones I'd ever seen. But looking in every direction were tourists. There was no time to stop, to think, to feel, the groups pushed onward and the noise distracted endlessly. Of course, along with the ingestion of instant culture comes the chance to purchase merchandise. Outside were vendors and shops hocking menorahs and Franz Kafka T-shirts, mezzot and tickets to concerts at Theresienstadt concentration camp. Prague with its deep history, magnificent art, and once thriving Jewish sector is becoming the very essence of kitschy merchandising, and the dependent victim of overeager tourists.

Eastern Europe hangs in a precarious state right now. Money must be pumped into the system, and entrepreneurship must take hold for these nations to survive in the market economy world. Yet, it seems that what is helping to feed