

Holocaust through Art.

Post-Holocaust Trauma Reflected in the Paintings of Jewish Survivors: Edith Birkin and Samuel Bak.

by Guy Dazin

Introduction

Over the years, there have been many different visual renderings and depictions of the events of the Holocaust, so much so that it has become very difficult to sustain a single coherent interpretation that can encapsulate the horrors and of the utmost lowest stratum, human inhumanness can reach.

I often heard a plethora of voices being expressed and often I have not been able to form a solid opinion and concretize; due to massive ideological, ethnic, racial, and gender differences when approaching the subject of mass murder and genocide.

The maelstrom that permeated the rest of our collective history up to this era compelled our thinking about violence to transmogrify radically. In the late 18th century and mid-19th century, romantic heroism and utopian ideals gradually disintegrated up to the First World War. (Rearing its ugly head again during World War II in the fascist states of; Italy, Japan, Spain, Germany...etc.)

The 20th century is a painstakingly obvious example of man's intrinsically predatory nature in terms of the acuteness of violence and its immediacy.

Since World War I, the world has lost its virginal "innocence", constant perpetuating cycles of news from the front, images of maimed soldiers returning home, relentless trench war that amounts to nothing, millions of combatants committed to a task, which Albert Einstein termed as 'insanity'. The past century has seen many human rights violations that are on a scale that diminishes anything that precipitated before it.

The Second World War that had ended in the most resounding and horrifying crescendo, the nuclear bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the liberation of the concentration death camps in Europe, taught us a disturbing lesson about the extent to which mankind can subjugate and annihilate his fellow human in the service of patriotism. Now more than ever we must give a voice to those that struggle for it.

After aligning my metaphor and approach (briefly and unimpressively), I have abandoned my remedial drafts for this paper and I will focus my chief concerns on the subject of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is a world in itself; there are no rules, no laws, and no conventions within its walls. The Holocaust, an example of genocide, is “the Nazi genocide against the Jews...it’s the effort of the Nazis to destroy the Jews as a group and to destroy the individual members of that group because – and only because – of that membership”¹ (Lang, 2005).

We often hear about this world being wholly sunken into a black hole where chaos is its sole master and normativity is sparse and inconsequential. This is often thought to have been the literal pulling of the lynchpin of being and that the consciousness of the entire world has been uprooted and altered beyond recognition. Therefore, any attempt to depict the Holocaust and its events, (artistically or otherwise) results in utter condemnation by popular opinion and is marked as blasphemous, (not without some legitimate concerns).

To preface my statement, I shall postulate thusly: We can never hope to categorize nor understand the suffering of others, but we can communicate it through art (the entire array of artistic crafts and disciplines). The truth and the question of art had been roaming wildly in people’s imaginations since the dawn of civilization (be it “Western” or “Eastern” societies).

The artistic movements of modernity suggest that if art is to be loyal to reality but not of it, artists have to stave off any notion of ‘aesthetic’ accomplishment and focus on provocation and innovation.

Art in the 20th and 21st centuries serves a social purpose as well as an aesthetic one, to create a language with which to address issues of rampant humanitarian crisis and abhorrent disregard for the value of human life.

It is also” a perpetual present-tense reminder that *human beings* experienced the horrors that the abyss looked into even if we can never truly understand such things, that this atrocity must never fall victim to the memory loss of time”. ² (Fear, 2016).

1. Genocides

1.1 Atrocity crimes legal definition

¹ Lang, Berel, “Comparative Evil”, Post-Holocaust: Interpretation, Misinterpretation, and the Claims of History, Cp.4, Alvin.H.Rosenfeld (Ed.), Indiana University Press, 2005, pp.55-56.

²

Fear, David; Rothkopf, Joshua; Uhlich, Keith (6 January 2016). "The 50 Best Documentaries of All Time", Time Out –New York, Retrieved February 7, 2016.

In 1948, United Nations General Assembly adopted the Genocide Convention. *Genocide* was the attempt to destroy “in whole part or part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such”. Among the acts that might constitute genocide were causing serious “mental harm” or inflicting “conditions of life” aimed at such destruction”.³ (Novick, 1999).

The term Genocide first appeared in 1944, in a book on the Second World War by Raphael Lemkin, "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe." It is linked with the Holocaust, although once the term was coined, it applied retrospectively to numerous of history’s dark moments. Genocide must be a ‘coordinated strategy,’ as Lemkin states.

1.2_Holocaust

Between 1933- 1945, Germany’s Nazi Party implemented an organized strategy of murder and genocide aimed at ethnically "purifying" Germany, the “Final Solution”. Six million Jews and five million Slavs, Roma gypsies, disabled, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, and political and religious dissidents were killed during the Holocaust.

The Holocaust phenomenon was a rupture in civilization. The Holocaust stands alone in the history of Western Civilization and the history of Genocide, because of two defining reasons: first- it sprang from one of the most cultured and civilized societies, the land of Goethe, Beethoven, Schiller, Brahms, and second it was the first time in history that a people were destroyed by an administrative order, in a planned and industrial manner.⁴ (Zuckermann, 1994)

“After Auschwitz” designates a metonymic line of (chronological) demarcation-a transformative moment in moral, social, and religious history ... the Holocaust having broken the traditional instruments of moral measurement... Evidence of this appears in the assembly of claims representing the post-Holocaust as unique or as a novum, a breach or turning point in moral history generally and in Jewish history specifically. Such characterizations start from the systematic cruelty inflicted in the Holocaust—with that

³ Novick, Peter, “The Is Past, and We Must Deal with the Facts Today”, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory.*, 1999, pp.100-101.

⁴ Zuckermann, Moshe, “Actions That Men Did to Men,” Interview with Yaron London, *Yediot Aharonot*, April 8, 1994 [Hebrew].

enormity also expressed in a related set of terms that call the Holocaust “indescribable,” “beyond words,” and “ineffable.”⁵ (Lang, 2005).

*“Auschwitz irrefutably demonstrated the failure of culture. That it could happen amid all the traditions of philosophy, art, and the enlightening sciences, says more than merely that these, the Spirit, was not capable of seizing and changing human beings. [...] Whoever pleads for the preservation of a radically culpable and shabby culture turns into its accomplice, while those who renounce culture altogether immediately promote the barbarism, which culture reveals itself to be.”*⁶ (Adorno, 2005).

2. Witnessing and Testimony of Traumatic Events

2.1 Unspeakable Horrors

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud ...this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*...”⁷ (Herman, 1992).

“In all of our accounts, verbal or written, one finds expressions such as “indescribable,” “inexpressible,” “words are not enough,” and “one would need a language for...”⁸ (Primo, 1987).

Samuel Bak characterizes his painting as “speaking about the unspeakable’... when he says, “Every work of art is always a kind of testimony against the artist,” he means that no painting of his is ever as good as he would like it to be.”⁹ (Bak, 2010)

⁵ Lang, Berel, “Comparative Evil”, Post-Holocaust: Interpretation, Misinterpretation, and the Claims of History, Cp.4, Alvin.H.Rosenfeld (Ed.), Indiana University Press, 2005, pp.55-56.

⁶ Adorno, Theodor W., Negative Dialectics. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, p. 358.

⁷ Herman, Judith, Trauma and Recovery, BasicBooks, New York, 1992, p.1.

⁸ Primo, Levi, If this is a man, Abascus Ed., London, 1987, pp.15-17.

⁹ Illuminations: The Art of Samuel Bak. Collection at Facing History and Ourselves. Facing History and Ourselves, Brookline, Massachusetts. 2010, pp. 2-4.

“...language is for the description of daily experience, but here it is another world, where one would need a language “of this other world,” a language born here ...”¹⁰ (Hornstein and Jacobowitz, 2003).

2.2 The Psychological Effect of Genocide on Survivors

“Victimized people tend to suffer from both post-traumatic stress disorder and complex trauma. Their basic security needs, for feelings of effectiveness and control over important events in one’s life, for positive identity, for positive connections to other people and communities, and a comprehension of reality and one’s place in the world, have all been deeply frustrated...they feel diminished and vulnerable”.¹¹ (Staub and Pearlman, 2009).

Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told...The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma...When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery”.¹² (Herman, 1992)

4. Holocaust through art

4.1 Horrors Depicted in Art

“Human history is absurdly violent”, since cave days, we find painting in graffiti, and other organic matter that clearly shows us the suffering and frustration of humankind with itself and that is the point at which man first sought meaning to his existence. And worse, we continue to defend it as the right thing to do.

¹⁰ Hornstein, Shelley and Jacobowitz, Florence, (Eds.), *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, p.1.

¹¹Staub, Ervin and Pearlman, Laurie Anne ,” *Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict: A Commentary “* , *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* , American Psychological Association 2009, Vol. 96, No. 3, 588–593.

¹² Herman, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery*, BasicBooks, New York, 1992, p.1.

The “gifted” and more sophisticated cave painters were engrossed with the natural world, as well as with themselves. Cave painting demoted man’s magnanimity and proportion, especially when it came to the attentiveness to details when depicting his image, some of the paintings show signs of some basic technical abilities -that came out of a kind of indiscernible interest in the natural world.

Art in the prehistoric era would not have had any functional role in society. It was most likely born out of some ritualistic fascination with scenes of everyday life and of the animal kingdom. Even in those days, the man had a great desire to venerate his name eternally, with whichever means he had been able to cultivate. Reality and art are so muddled together in cave paintings, to the point where they become one.

Despite ancient humans’ inability to distinguish clearly between reality and art, they show a different kind of perceptivity, that far outweighs their “primitivism” and that is ceremonial burial.

Interestingly, ancient humans dug up graves (granted, superficially...but deliberately) for their dead, an important indication of some kind of a significant step forward.

Not unlike the ancient Homo sapiens, modern man’s rationality is often instructed by his emotions to a considerable degree. Conversely, man is composed and is capable of abstract thinking when faced with the occasion (often not). Ultimately, man has to concede that he is a social creature and as that, has to learn to socialize and interact with other humans, without causing them harm (physical or in any other way impeding their fundamental liberties).

Humankind has faced intellectual and societal dilemmas since its inception. Art came to serve a purpose that is rationalistically untenable in functional terms to society as a whole.

Yet, art predates the advent of writing, the wheel, and even clothes! The violence of man perpetrated against other man had indeed existed before art (or some rudimentary form that qualifies as an artistic expression) was conceived.

Even though eons have since passed, man still finds a way to abuse his fellow man. Horror is regarded as one of the fundamental human experiences, that many artists like Michelangelo, Albrecht Durer, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, etc., have tried to capture in their works; great directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Guillermo Del Toro, and great writers Edgar Allen Poe, William Faulkner, Mary Shelley, Franz Kafka and so on. When Dostoyevsky flogs Turgenev for his prudish and unbecoming conservatism in the matter of depicting horror,(I gather) that Dostoyevsky understands truth as being

manifested by the visual stimulant of an anomalous occurrence that is tragic in nature and Turgeniev that seeks to give to the elaboration of the consequences, and not the travesty itself.

The human allegory of transcending through death (such as we've seen from literary works like *"Myth of Er"* by Plato, The story of Jesus in the New Testament, The assumption of Elijah in the Old Testament ...etc.) is not always possible, for (as Ovid suggests in *"The Metamorphoses"*) there are instances when catastrophe paralyzes the body (and the mind at times), like Medusa (who was a beautiful woman) the Gorgon that turns people into stone when they gaze directly at her head of snakes.

Horror and Art have always aspired to be a mirror reflection of each other –for example, *"The Massacre of The Innocents"* painted by Peter Paul Rubens (which might not have depicted real events that transpired is a herculean step in the depiction of atrocity. The human flesh is real and has the proper volume and metrics of a real person. A resounding sense of terror carried through the mind of the artist into the depicted figures. The savage and animalistic portrayal of the ruthlessness of the Roman soldiers grasps our very soul. This depiction might have been the apex of atrocity and is consistent with Dostoyevsky's treatment of horror in art. But similarly, we get depictions of atrocity that are at their core not the least bit awe-inspiring, that potentially impede us from extracting beauty; like Edvard Munch's painting *"The Scream"* that do not allow us to transcend but to be thrown into a never-ending spiral of misery.

From the Dadaist movement (Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Janco) that originated in neutral Switzerland during World War I, to the cabal that is constructivism (El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko), French/Spanish surrealist movements (Magritte, Dali, De Chirico) had one unifying aim; to rid ourselves of all rational thought in addition to ills that past generations had bequeathed to us.

Although the closest we were to a prophetic notion of a universal conflict in art, depicted in the apocalyptic landscape of the German expressionist art movement (*"Die Brucke"*) within a very short period before the war and for a brief instant after it as well.

Van Gogh was the grandfather of the expressionist movement and also of the art-Nouveau stream in art. Van Gogh's portrayal of suffering and loneliness, of eeriness and uncertainty brought about a massive overhaul in the conception of what art should strive to be.

Akin to the second commandment, the Holocaust's events were regarded in many intellectual circles to be a taboo subject matter in the eyes of middle and upper-class burghers and elsewhere. Art is entirely dejected from genocide, nevertheless, questions along the lines of; subjectivity, perception, ethics, reason, and much more, are frequently asked on both subjects.

4.2 Holocaust Representation in visual memory.

Over the years, there have been many different visual renderings and depictions of the events of the Holocaust, so much so that it has become very difficult to sustain a single coherent interpretation that can encapsulate the horrors and of the utmost lowest stratum, human inhumanness can reach.

Adorno notes: “Here we see the indivisibility of the genocide (the ‘history’) from the artwork – that what is seen is not mere ‘depiction’ but art’s ability to turn the anonymous statistics or the unknown genocide into the realization of a brutal annihilation of individual human beings – to bring history to life as it were. What the viewer does after viewing such art is perhaps immaterial; the important thing is that they now *know*.”¹³ (Adorno, 2005).

“Art and Atrocities are concepts that seem to be mutually exclusive; they belong to two entirely different spheres which appear to be separated by an unbridgeable gap. Art has aesthetic rules and strives for beauty and personal expression”.¹⁴ (Amishai –Maisels, 1993).

Out of the cornucopia of artistic representations of the holocaust by various individuals, there is some consistent imagery; namely one of the death camps. There are some taboo subjects even within the discussion of what is appropriate to of showing and what is not. Death is seen as pathological in broader Western society and in the context of the Holocaust, this avoidance is increased ten folds, specifically in certain types of deaths chiefly; the crematorium and the dead bodies in the gas chamber.

I know of no artistic representation of the gas chamber beside the artistic body of work of Holocaust victims and survivors –because of the nature of this act and its dire results.

The works of artists are uniform in that they all stem from a feeling of horror that is indefinable and obscure to our awakened faculties in their relatively “sane” and quotidian state of mind-something that is analogous to the idea of the “Language of Art”. Meaning: our day to day dialectics will not suffice when it comes to encountering horror (or a series of horrors) that is unfolding in front of our eyes and that has a meaning within itself that

¹³ Adorno, Theodor W., *Negative Dialectics*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, p. 358.

¹⁴ Amishai -Maisels, Ziva. *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993, pp.323-354.

we are incapable of perceiving instantaneously because of the immediacy and gruesomeness of the horror. (Alternatively, it is confounding and paralyzing effects).

4.3 **Post-Holocaust, post-Jewish from individuality to collective memory.**

“The art of survivors created out of a deep-seated need, a need to memorialize those who did not survive – something more akin to an obligation, a need to confront the burden they carry with them as survivors. These people, who are not professional artists, have tried to create a visual conduit to somehow express the inexpressible: a plastic, accessible language to describe the indescribable. They use their artwork to tell their individual stories to the world and to illustrate the atrocities they experienced”.¹⁵

Edith Birkin- Biography and Artwork

Born in 1928 in Prague, Edith Birkin was sent with her family to the Lodz Ghetto in 1941. She was 14 years old. Her parents died there within a year and when the ghetto was liquidated, Edith was sent to Auschwitz. Selected for slave labor, she spent the rest of the war working in an underground munitions factory. She took part in one of the notorious death marches and arrived, in 1945, at Belsen, where she was liberated. On her return to Prague, she discovered that none of her family had survived. In 1946, she settled in England, where she became a teacher; she went on to adopt three children. Birkin’s painting is a response to her experiences during the Holocaust. Edith Birkin attested of her art: “I evolved a pictorial language that enabled me to put my visions on canvas. It was not so much the cruelty or physical suffering that I wanted to record. Most of all, I wanted to show what it felt like to be a human being, in the starved, emaciated strange looking body, forever being separated from loved ones”. About the gas chambers: "Of course, we soon realized that there was this big chimney, you know, out of which came a lot of smoke, and the sky was red, the sky was red all the time”.¹⁶ (Birkin Interview, 1996).

¹⁵ Ochayon, Sheryl Silver, Commemoration in the Art of Holocaust Survivors. The International School for Holocaust Studies, 2012.

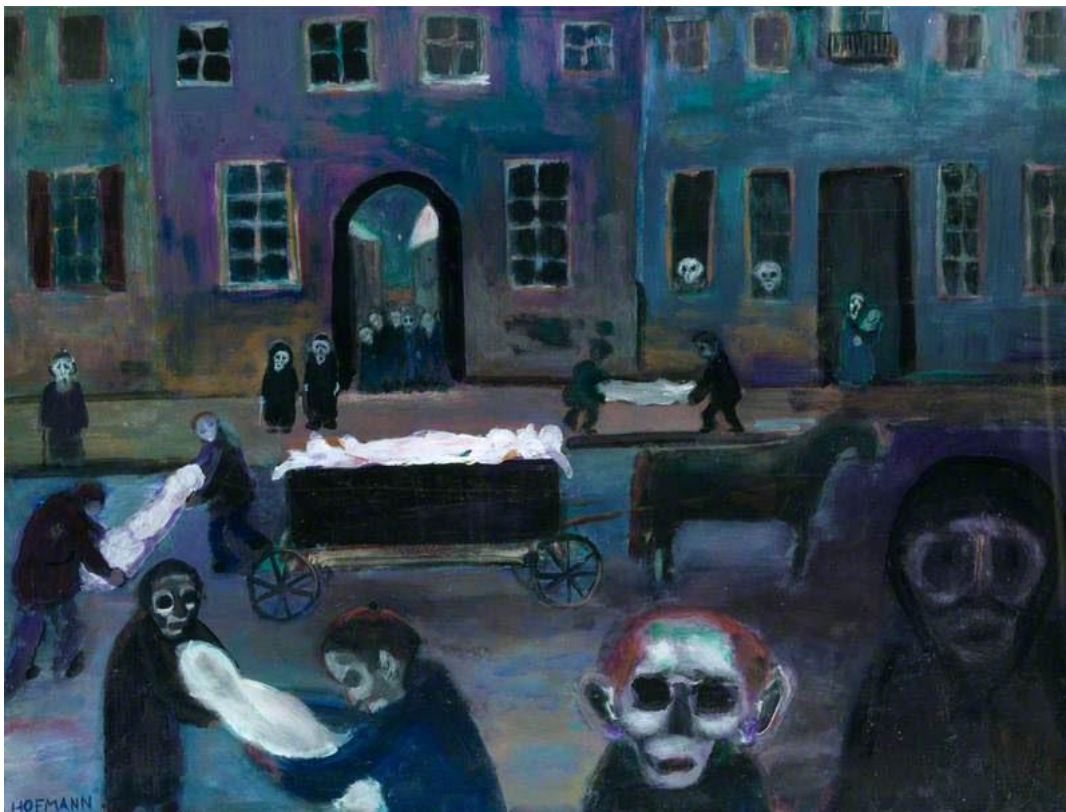
www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/26/main_article.asp

¹⁶ ‘Living Memory of the Jewish Community: Edith Birkin’. Interviewed by Katherine Thompson C410/030/01-09, Oral History British Library Sound Archive 96 Euston Road NW1 2DB 020 7412 7404 oralhistory@bl.uk Gether



“The Last Goodbye”, 1972.

The painting depicts a scene from the concentration camps where a group of children is seen on the left side of the painting and the chimney of a crematorium can be identified in the background. One child is standing in the foreground tilting her/his head toward the left side and another small child is seen trying to reach her mother behind the curled fence.



“The Death Cart - Lodz Ghetto”, 1980

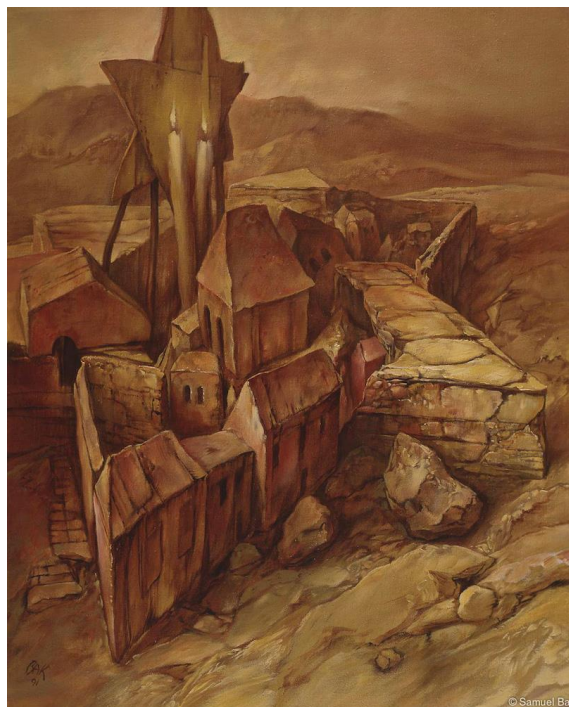
When describing the painting Edith Birkin said: “How many people stop to think that the six million dead were individual human beings with dreams of their own, each with a story to tell, each wanting to live? This is why the people in my paintings are depicted in different colors.”

Shmuel Bak- Biography and Artwork

Shmuel Bak was born in Vilna, in 1933, When Vilna was occupied by the Nazis on June 24, 1941, Bak and his family were forced to move into the Vilna Ghetto. At the age of nine, he held his first exhibition inside the ghetto. By the end of the war, Samuel and his mother were the only members of his extended family to survive. Bak studied painting in Munich just before immigrating to Israel in 1948. In 1952, he studied art at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. Bak served in the Israel Defense Forces from 1953-1956. Between the 1960s and 1990s, he studied and lived in Paris, New York, and Lausanne before settling permanently in the United States.¹⁷

Samuel Bak attested about his art: “My use of symbols, icons, and metaphors managed to keep the underlying horror of my world at bay; it protected me and protected the future audience of my paintings. For me, being a painter means being possessed by a world of ghosts; and making the best of it. “

“Camp”, 1992



¹⁷ “Samuel Bak- an arduous road”, “Childrens in Holocaust”, Bearing Witness-Stories behind the Artifacts in the Yad Vashem. Museum.http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/he/exhibitions/bearing_witness/children_holocaust_cohen.asp

The candles of the Camp are still burning, eternal flames that ironically immortalize death. The absence of human figures forces the viewer to consider the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish life and culture. The Star of David, like a watchtower of commemoration, proclaims to future generations the identity of those who perished in this place. The unextinguished candles with their seemingly eternal flame suggest that nothing will—or should—ever erase the memory of this event i.e. the Holocaust.



“Sanctuary”, 1997

In this painting, we see two realities, one of the photos of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto holding up his hands and a kind of pictorial collage made from various materials. The landscape seems to be a South American rainforest of sorts, and the composition of the statue is an ancient ruin that is being abandoned and undiscovered for centuries. The figure on the bottom of the altar is defaced as if to say that the memory of his identity has been razed, and on the top half of the altar we have a slightly slimmer figure with its face untouched by time, he has a more Romanesque feature, depicted as a young Julian or a Caligula like visage.

Both their hands are raised and are pierced something that appears to be a bullet hole or disintegration of the materials. Ultimately we can surmise that the holes are a reminder of the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross equivocating the victims of the Holocaust to the sufferings of the passions of Jesus.

Conclusion

To conclude I cannot deny the indelible importance of Holocaust writings, literature, studies, poetry, documentation, testimony, and so on...but I shall not diminish the utmost necessity of the plastic art in and of the Holocaust. The visual arts were and always will be the most communicative of all the arts. To regard art in the Holocaust as testimony would be an understatement, it is how we get an up close and intimate view of the Holocaust and the daily lives (and mainly deaths) of people in the concentration camps and death camps.

“I believe it is important to remember. The question is how to remember. First, I would like the Holocaust to be taught chapter by chapter, as an action done by men to other men, and not as something done by friends to human beings. One must teach how the Holocaust was conceived and what was the ideology that drove its planners, how it was carried out, and what the world’s reaction was.... Second, I would like teachers and political leaders to inculcate in us the understanding that what happened in the Holocaust could have happened and may still happen, anywhere in the world, to all peoples”. (Zuckermann, 1994).

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