

# Going home to Auschwitz

an essay by Marsha Lederman

**C**emetery, ghetto, orphanage, concentration camp... And I tell people I'm looking forward to my heritage trip.

As I read through my itinerary, a chill runs through me: Monday: Cemetery, Ghetto. Tuesday: Orphanage. Wednesday: Treblinka. Thursday: Auschwitz.

I am going home.

I suppose Poland isn't really my home, or even the home of my parents, despite the fact they were both born there. But the things that happened in these terrible places, the things that happened to my parents, who somehow survived, and my grandparents, who did not—these things happened at “home.” And these things are my horrifying heritage; they define me.

Sadly, my mother called Thursday's destination “home” for three harrowing months, although I'm sure that word never actually escaped her chapped and thirsty lips to describe her prison, Auschwitz.

So why do I venture back to this land that was so hostile to my people, to my parents? Why go back to look at piles of hair and ashes, at ominous blackened chimneys, at blossoming fields which conceal immense cemeteries?

These are questions I ask myself as I prepare to travel to Poland, along with my mother, two sisters and my niece, and many other survivors,

children of survivors and grandchildren. We will participate in what's called the March of the Living. Thousands of Jews from around the world will march along the railway tracks from Auschwitz to Birkenau on *Yom Haschoah*, the day to commemorate the Holocaust. We will carry Israeli flags and sing *Hatikvah*, the Jewish national anthem (meaning “hope”), on the killing fields that claimed our parents and grandparents. We will say *kaddish* for these people, the prayer for the dead. We will recite this prayer for millions of dead people—children, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, aunts, uncles, grandparents. My grandparents.

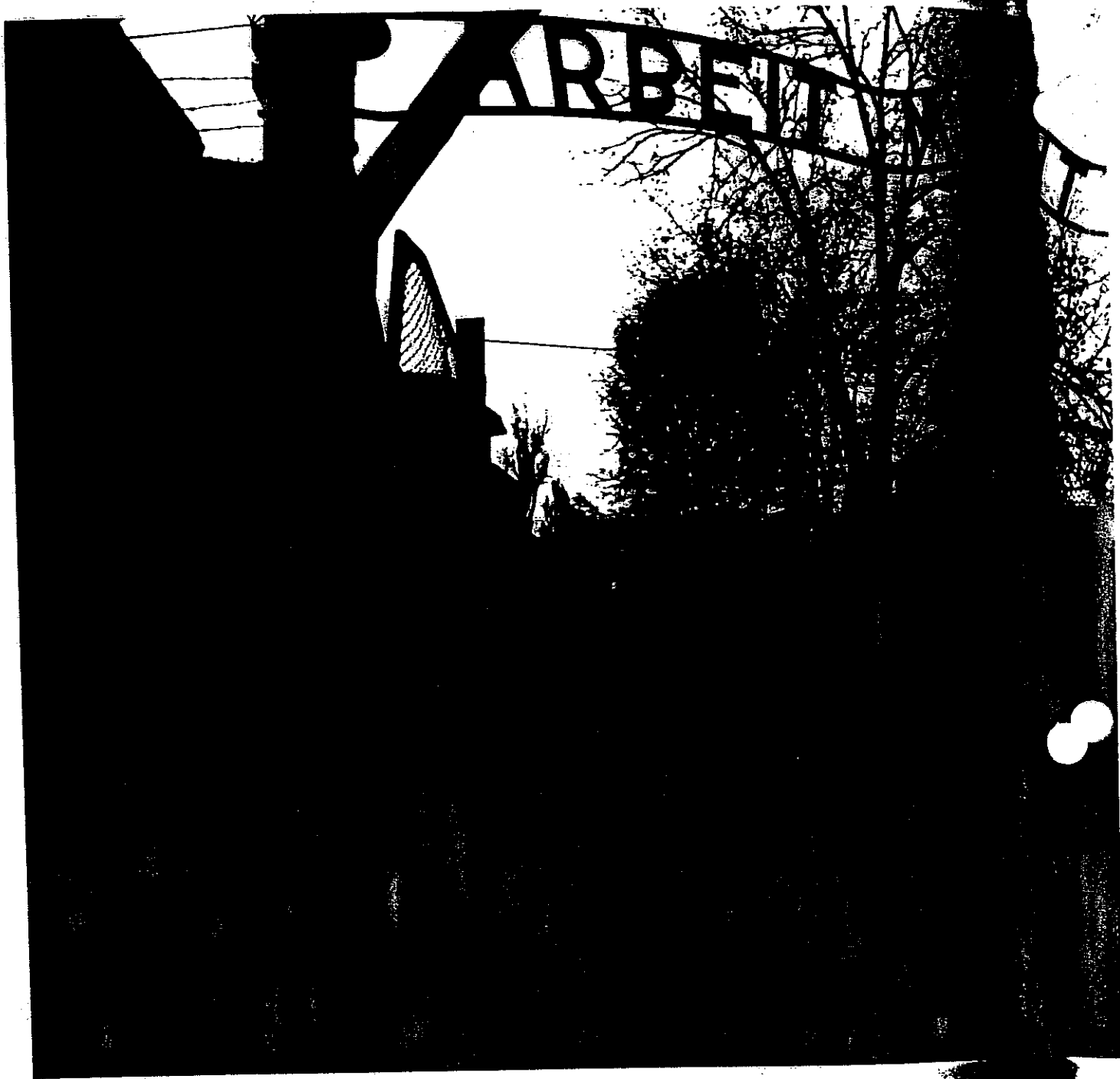
It sounds almost romantic, this group of Jews gathering to assert our existence and to thumb our collective noses at the Nazis. It sounds cathartic, an appropriate end for a piece of tragic literature. But this is not fiction. And I suspect the ending cannot be happy, no matter how triumphant we may seem as we march along those tracks that took our ancestors to their deaths.

There will be a sense of closure, I suspect. And a sense of victory. You killed my grandparents. You tried to kill my parents. You tried to extinguish my people. But now I am back. And I will not let the story of your killing die. I will tell anyone who will listen. I will force those who will not listen to learn the dreadful truth.

*Lucas*  
READING THIS ESSAY WILL HELP YOU:

Reading this essay will help you:

- work with word connotation
- consider many levels of meaning
- analyse an essay's structure
- represent tone in another medium



Am I wrong to return with my mother? My sisters and I agonize over this question. As a teenager, my mother had the strength to somehow survive numerous labour and concentration camps, even the notorious Auschwitz. But will she survive this trip back to hell intact? When she enters through the gates of the camp and sees

the infamous words "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" (work will set you free) once again, what turmoil will she go through?

Will she show us the barracks she slept in; the piece of flat wood that gave her a few hours of rest each night? Will she point and say "there—that's where I was beaten by a soldier for



mumbling my name at roll call"? Will she pose for a photograph in the room where her head was shaved?

Some Holocaust survivors and children of survivors refuse to set foot on German or Polish soil. They don't want to benefit the economy of a country like Poland where Jewish groups who

pay homage to the dead are still taunted by youths shouting "Heil Hitler." Others simply can't bear the pain.

Before his death, my father ventured back to Poland, where he was born, and Germany, where he survived the war under a false identity. Imprisoned in a labour camp in Poland, he managed to secure false papers and escape to Germany. Jacob Lederman, Polish Jew, became Tadek Rudnitski, Polish Catholic. For two-and-a-half years he laboured on a farm six days a week, eating—no, devouring—bacon and pork when it was available, celebrating Easter, praying to Jesus. Each Sunday he would lead the family to church, urging them to hurry, not to be late.

Once inside, with the wafer of communion in his mouth, my father quietly called forth his own God, urging Him to end the war, to keep him safe, to keep his family safe. For two-and-a-half years, my father prayed that no one would see him go to the bathroom. God did end the war and He did keep my father safe. But not a single member of my father's immediate family survived. His parents, older sister and little brother all died in the gas chamber.

When my father returned to Germany in 1979, he received a hero's welcome from the farming family with which he lived during the war. There were celebrations, large (porkless) meals, gifts and warm hugs.

But when he ventured to Poland, it was a much more difficult experience. He visited Treblinka, where his parents, brother and sister were gassed. "I walked around the death camp for a few hours," he wrote in his journal, "trying to figure out the layout and operation there. The ramp is intact, so are some roads built by Jewish slaves.... It is so quiet and green everywhere—so different from those horrible times!"

He visited his childhood home: "I am in the room where I left my family, never to see them again. It is a shattering experience. I am breaking

up and can't talk any more. Extremely heartbroken." The woman who lived there remembered my father's parents. She told him they had left a letter for him, but after more than 30 years without word, she had thrown it away, figuring my father had died in the war. This was devastating information.

Upon visiting a cemetery, my father wrote, "I found all mass graves, took some pictures of that tragic scene, looked with horror at that huge grave which my dear, gentle brother with sweat and blood over his face helped to dig under the inhuman rigour of the SS."

My father was in Lodz, the city of his birth, for the High Holidays. The few Jews left spent the morning in synagogue, then invited my father home for a Rosh Hashanah meal. They served ham.

My father came back from that trip early. He could not stand to be in the land of his

persecution any longer. He wanted to hold his wife, his children.

I tell people I am looking forward to my heritage trip, but the truth is I have never been so scared of anything in my life. Am I crazy for going? Is this my way of paying homage to the grandparents I never knew? What exactly am I trying to prove here?

I am going to prove my existence. I am going to spit on the demonic plans of Hitler, simply by walking on land he tried to make *Judenfrei* (free of Jews) with gas and guns. I am going. And, if nothing else, I simply *am*. I exist. I breathe.

During his trip back to the killing fields, my father wrote, "I am realizing the great obligation attached to me, the last one of all my family.... I won't forget you, my dear restless souls gliding over the greenery of Treblinka."

With this trip, I am fulfilling my obligation. I am refusing to forget. ■

## Responding...

- In her introduction, Lederman defines Auschwitz as "home." What does she mean by this? How does her explanation affect the meaning of the title?
  - In your own words, describe what Lederman means by "Going home to Auschwitz." Consider more than one level of meaning.
- The ending of the essay uses a device called "closing by return." With a partner, explain how the essay brings readers back to the introduction, thereby creating a closing by return.
  - Develop a visual representation of the design of the essay. Explain why you chose the design you did.
- With a partner, discuss the tone of Lederman's essay. Consider other tones she might have used. Work together to develop a short mime, dance, or piece of music that portrays one of these other tones.