ARIE GALLES

Fourteen Stations/Hey Yud Dalet suite
Station 1-Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1998
Charcoal and white Conté, 47.5 X 75 in

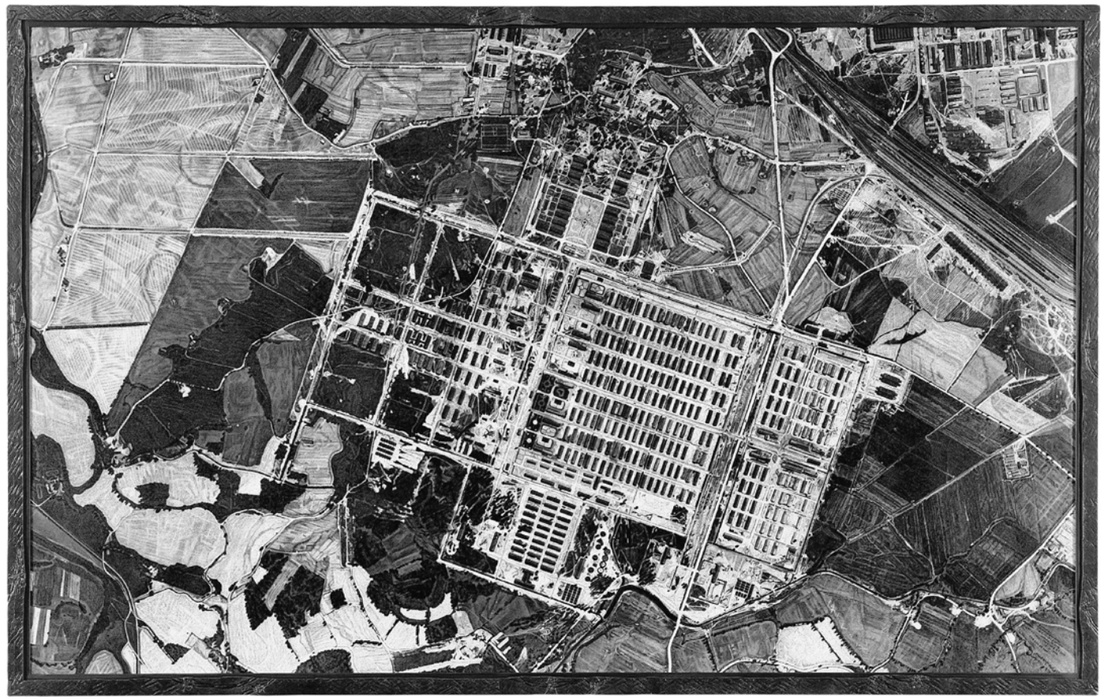

PHOTO: TIM VOLK

CHERYL CHAFFIN

Looking for Buna-Monowitz

A Search for Primo Levi's History at Auschwitz

I had to understand Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi's experience to the point that I had to see, feel, and experience, granted in some removed, remote way, the ground that is Auschwitz. I also had to understand that this ground could in no way resemble anything Levi had experienced. But, I wanted to be there, to know what remained. I applied and was accepted to the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program and spent a week in New York City and three weeks in Poland in June and July 2014. The reason I had come to Auschwitz, even to Poland, was because of a passion for reading and teaching in my college English courses Levi's two-part memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening*, of his ten months in the camp, in particular Buna-Monowitz, a labor subcamp known also as Auschwitz III. The grounds that once housed the charnel grounds and forced labor camps of Nazi Germany have returned to Poland, to the ordinary and daily lives of Polish people, particularly those who live in and around the town of Oświęcim.

All around Auschwitz I and Birkenau (Auschwitz II) there were now modest houses with gardens. People had always lived here. Beginning in 1940, homes and farms were demolished to build the death and labor camps and their extensive network of subcamps. One of the first experimental gas chambers at Auschwitz II had been a Polish farmhouse—the little red house—from which the owners had been evicted. The space that became the camp grew as the Germans ravenously devoured the Polish country in and around Oświęcim for their killing purposes. Yet, life returns, even and especially after war, to cover the scarred and torn earth.

Eva Serfozo, my roommate, and I rode bikes through the hamlets around Oświęcim on a hot Saturday in July. We could have gone back to the camps for another day. It was a free day and the fellows, some of them, had returned to spend time in the national exhibits and halls at Auschwitz I. We had barely walked Birkenau's vast expanse, and it had poured rain there on Wednesday when we had visited. We had sheltered with our guide, part of a crowd of visitors, under the entry into the former camp, on the railroad tracks. How ironic, I thought in those moments of deluge, that we are seeking refuge where transports arrived. So, I could have gone back. But I was sick. I felt sick there. By the third day at the camps, sitting in a lecture room

in the former Auschwitz I barracks, listening to a man drone on about documents (only 3 percent of former documents remain found), my stomach hurt. I felt despondent, exhausted, unable to tolerate a lecture, a study of documentation and archival records, sitting in a theater seat on the very spot of genocide and every kind of imaginable torture. I felt that people's spirits surrounded me, or at least the memory and tangible suffering of their presence. I felt the historical suffering—not a knowledge, but a feeling of being part of, inseparable from, the people who had seen this ground, felt its great imposing wound in their lives.

It was not solely the methods by which people were physically and psychically murdered that sickened me, but the humanness of which people were systematically raped that made me ill. I needed to beat the ground and wail at humanity, the very curse of it. It was a feeling, more than a knowledge, a shared sense of being human, of having a human wholeness in body and in mind and sensation, through time, a continuity and assuredness of this humanness and then an absolute and total violation, an erasure of it, as a fact that made me ill. I wanted to run and knew—intellectually—that I could not. I knew that my humanity meant, at this very moment, not running. I knew I had to listen to the lecture with embodied knowledge of horror and the existential acknowledgment of material knowledge, the endless recounting of facts, the review of history, the review of the archive that must happen ceaselessly in an effort of retrospective sense-making.

Those feelings were not academic, as feelings rarely are, and I did not care. By Saturday, I felt I should go back; there was so much more. Yet, I could not. I chose not to. I wanted to ride a bike in the Polish sunshine and humidity. I wanted a day with a pale-blue sky and burning sun and Polish traffic and a green river, now clean, and the sound of families swimming in view of picnics, and people out in the streets for groceries and in their yards for gardening and socializing. I wanted life.

At the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, in an old black-and-white photo, almost sepia toned, of the time—there was a line of prisoners, working, carrying things, in the ubiquitous striped uniforms. The air was sooty, dense with coal, the metal of industry, the ash of burned bodies. The ground was trodden, no living plant visible, everything smashed to dirt. Paths of prisoners' feet blazed into the ground. The camp in one space and then a line of fuzzy humans to a work area, the prisoners carrying things to a designated spot. I remembered Levi had carried, with another man, a steel beam. He had not shouldered it successfully and the beam fell and opened the back of his foot. A foot injury meant death. He did not remove his wooden shoe. He did not want to look, to know. When he did, he found his sock drenched in blood. He spent days in the infirmary. Was Levi there in the photo? I knew that at some point, beyond February 1944, he would have been there, somewhere. I looked closer. An abyss—the true hell that Levi had described, another world, something unreal. Had that world existed here in Oświęcim, somewhere along the bike paths edged in high green grass? Yes, it had.

I was looking for the remains of Buna-Monowitz. To explain the camp name, butadiene (Bu) is a chemical made from the processing of petroleum, which can be polymerized using sodium (Na, from the Latin *natrium*) to make synthetic rubber. Monowice (Monowitz in German) is the Polish town, just adjacent to Oświęcim, where the plant was erected. The labor camp had been Complex IV of the Auschwitz compound, a few kilometers from the main camp. Levi worked there as a young man in his midtwenties, a chemist, a slave laborer of the Germans in their IG Farben plant. In the end, just before the Germans fled and as the Russians approached, the Allies bombed every day. In *The Periodic Table* Levi writes of those final days in the camp, "The Russians were knocking at the door . . . Allied planes came to shake apart the Buna plant: there was no water, steam, or electricity; not a single pane of glass was intact; but the order was to begin producing Buna rubber, and Germans do not discuss orders. . . . To work was as impossible as it was futile; our time was almost entirely spent dismantling the apparatus at every air-raid alarm and putting them together again at the all-clear." Even then, with Levi inside the factory trying to work, the place was being destroyed. What did I expect to see but fragments, some skeletal structures of the past?

The green Polish earth was past full blossom. Humidity hung in the air, the sky a dullish high white. Eva rode ahead of me on the bike. I looked to my left, high on the bike path, to old, abandoned structures. In the end, for Levi, it was January, a Polish winter I would never know, a cold I could not fathom. His hands were so cold it was hard to work. He continues, "every so often some inspector burrowed through the rubble and snow all the way to us to make sure that the lab's work proceeded according to instructions." The picture he provides his reader is darkly comic. The local militia and German civilians burrowing through rubble and snow to check on rubber production as Levi and his fellow chemists dismantle and reassemble lab equipment, the deluded Germans demanding their orders and instructions fulfilled in freezing temperatures under bombardment from the air!

The Buna camp ruins are not on the guided Auschwitz tour. I had read online that the camp was walled off, not open to visitors. There was a stone monument in Monowice to workers that had labored and died there at the Buna Werke. But Eva and I did not find the town. My roommate was patient with my obsession with the writer and his life as it was lived those months in Poland. Yet, she could not have been terribly interested in retracing Primo Levi's steps from Auschwitz to Buna-Monowitz on a humid Saturday at high noon.

I relaxed into the heat and humidity, riding along—Eva somewhere behind me or ahead of me—the confluence of the Sola and Vistula Rivers and over a busy bridge, under shelter of shaded trees. We stopped. I did not think we were close. Then, we set out in the other direction, back along the river, and over railroad tracks, through small towns, to a reservoir where teenagers swam and dove. I began to doubt myself. Why did I so desperately want to find the ruins? Everywhere Poles were living, happy, out in the heat, walking, swimming, making their homes, buying their groceries, riding bikes, and tending their gardens. From the raised bike path along train tracks, I could see beautiful little gardens—chickens, grass, tool sheds, fruit trees, and vegetable beds. We ended up in Babice, a village where there had been a small subunit of the Auschwitz camp, a forced labor camp, maybe an agricultural farm. On a winding residential street we spotted a pair of storks nested high upon a telephone pole. Eva and I stopped to take their picture. Why, after three days at Auschwitz, on tours and in various seminars, did I want to find the place that Levi had worked in a laboratory for several miserable winter months of his otherwise full and satisfying life? Eva and I stopped at the reservoir and watched boys jump from a cement edge into the water below. We shared chocolate, a granola bar, a piece of fruit, and some water.

Back on the bike trail, heading once again in the direction of Oświęcim, I could see old factory ruins. The Allies had repeatedly bombed the factory in late 1944 and Levi had been through those bombings, narrowly missing explosions. Seven months after my return home from the fellowship trip, I inquire of Maciek, who was my guide those weeks in Poland, about Buna-Monowitz. He informs me that the Monowitz camp is not there anymore. "Most of the grounds are now a private factory called Synthos," he writes, "Hence it's not part of the official Auschwitz museum tour. The factory was partly bombed by the Allies, and after the war it continued to operate. It's been a key workplace for many Oświęcimians since, including some Holocaust survivors." A few survivors of Auschwitz worked in the chemical factory in Oświęcim, years after the closure of the camp. The factory was remade, rebuilt, renamed multiple times, in short, leveled and reimagined. But, the skeleton of its memory remained. One of the few remaining Jewish residents of Oświęcim, Samuel Kluger, worked at the factory. He lived alone, a recluse in the town, working and living on grounds where once his own demise had been intended. He remained: tenacious, living, working, going on against every intention that had been planned otherwise for his present and future. His home, in disrepair, was purchased and renovated in 2013 and 2014 by the Auschwitz Jewish Center. It is now Café Bergson, one of the most beautiful cafes in Poland. It was there we spent many hours as AJC fellows discussing our tours in Auschwitz, films on Polish history and present, processing our time in small towns where synagogues were either rebirthed or remained in ruins.

The Kluger Family House (located behind the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue) was most likely constructed at the turn of the twentieth century. Szymon Kluger, Oświęcim last surviving Jewish resident, became the homeowner in 1962; his mother's family had owned the home since 1928. After the Holocaust, Szymon settled in Sweden and worked there until 1961, at which point he returned to Oświęcim and worked for the chemical factory for a short time. Szymon Kluger died on May 26, 2000, in Oświęcim and was buried in Oświęcim Jewish cemetery. The current chemical manufacturer, Synthos, is a major

provider of jobs in Poland. The factory has been through multiple transformations since Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by the Russians on January 27, 1945, as indicated by the company's website:

> Synthos PLC was founded on September 1st, 1945, as the Factory of Synthetic Fuels in Dwory. In 1946, the company was renamed Państwowe Zakłady Syntezy Chemicznej w Dworach (State-owned Chemical Synthesis Plants of Dwory). In 1948, the name was changed to: Zakłady Syntezy Chemicznej w Dworach (Chemical Synthesis Plants of Dwory). One year later, the company was renamed Zakłady Chemiczne–Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe Wyodrębnione w Oświęcimiu (Chemical Works, Separate State Company of Oświęcim).

Maciek writes, "There are some leftovers of the camp structure outside of the Synthos factory, e.g., antiaircraft bunkers and single barracks, converted into sheds on private grounds. But they're scarce." Synthos. Synthesis. Synthesize. History has been synthesized, its horror and terror, into the present life of pastoral, industrial, Communist, and, now, democratic Poland. The factory was somewhat of a watershed for Levi. Strangely, once selected to work there, he was, as his biographer Ian Thomson explains, "now among a privileged caste of specialist slaves who were destined to live a few months longer than their fellows."

One has to sometimes look for history, for evidence of past events, and, naturally, given change and growth, one is too often unsuccessful in finding it. What one lives of the past—whether through material experience or vicariously in narrative, art, music, and film—is mostly not what one finds in the present. My adult life has been pocked by travels to find the energetic presence of authors and artists who have moved me. In Concord, I walked around Walden Pond, imagining Thoreau, and visited the house of Ralph Waldo Emerson; in Amherst, the house of Emily Dickinson. In New Mexico, I sought Georgia O'Keeffe's lodgings, landscapes, and paintings; in Chile, the houses, cities, and beaches of Pablo Neruda. In Canada, in the paintings of Emily Carr, I sought to know the confluence of First Nation and European cultures. Levi has written that perfection belongs to narrated events, not to those we live.

So it was that I did not find Buna-Monowitz. I found a river, a pair of nesting storks, a village of gardens, boys swimming, and a late afternoon meal with Eva and other AJC fellows near to the places where Levi had once suffered and had physically escaped, and that, through corporeal memory, he continued to carry over his lifetime. He gave his memories to others, to his readers, to carry so that those memories would become our own. He asked us to be judges for him, to shoulder the burden of history. How could I read Levi and not be haunted by what he had left me? Poland was a way to bring that haunting into the world, and so I rode with it that day on the bike, my own burden lighter and exposed to sun and air. I will ride with those memories, fragmented, foreign, fuzzy, even lost, for the remainder of my life.

Cheryl Chaffin teaches English composition, literature, and creative writing at Cabrillo College in Aptos, California. She has participated in the Stanford Human Rights Education Initiative. She has an MFA in writing from Goddard College and a PhD in humanities from Union Institute and University's. In 2014 she traveled to Poland on fellowship with Auschwitz Jewish Fellows, out of which a book-length work emerged. *After Poland: A Memoir Because of Primo Levi* constitutes a creative and critical exploration of what it means to be human in the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The project extends beyond Poland's borders to Italy, Chile, and California, in that it concerns writing and what it means to love writers and to confront and integrate history through the works of writers and artists. Chaffin's essays, poems, and book reviews have been published in the *Sun*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *In Print*, *Penumbra*, *Ex-Centric Narratives*, *Mothers and Daughters*, and *Lifewriting Annual*.

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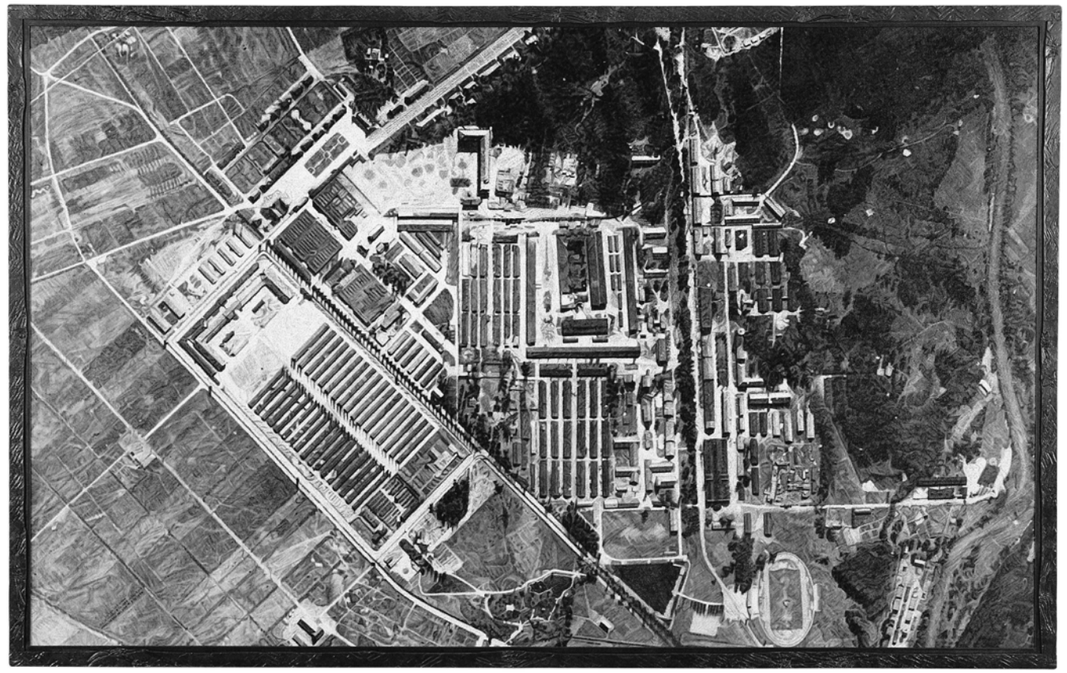

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