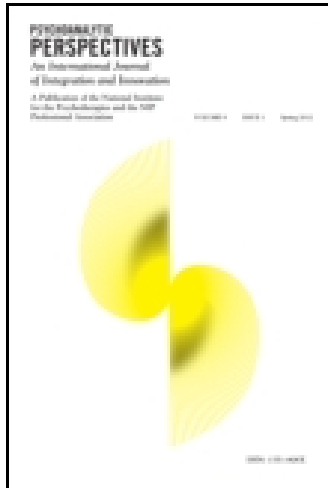


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Jon Mills PsyD, PhD, ABPP

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ON FOUND OBJECTS: REFLECTIONS ON AUSCHWITZ

JON MILLS, PsyD, PhD, ABPP

It was December 19 in a rural community outside of Kraków. I was anticipating an abreaction, both dreading yet wanting it at the same time, when I felt a clinical detachment come over me instantly as I stepped into the first compound.¹ It was cold, but there was no snow. I was numb inside—no, I take that back, rather an absence of feeling best describes it, but I didn't know it then. I was frozen but it felt like nothingness. In retrospect, I believe I had rushed through the whole tour, simply wanting to escape. A free-floating trance permeated my visit throughout the entire day, like I was recovering from a hangover. I was unaware of any of this at the time. I can only conclude that my defenses had arranged this so that the details would not overwhelm me.

I've been prone to dissociate since childhood. One of my first formal photographs as a toddler dressed in Sunday's best depicts a sepia tone studio portrait with my mouth wide open staring off into space with an empty gaze like a goldfish in a bowl. It may have been the desperate faces on the walls in Block 6 riddled with trauma, the vacant stares looking into the photographer's camera during official processing after they debarked from the trains, having been stripped of their clothes and belongings, separated from family members, and, if they were in the wrong line, deceived into taking showers to refresh from the long excursion they endured cooped up in cattle cars like animals for days. Many were dead upon arrival. By 1943, most of the Jewish children of Auschwitz, after being numbered and photographed, were immediately sent to the Birkenau sector of the camp where four large brick buildings shrouded the gas chambers and crematoria. This was the extermination center for European Jewry, blown up by German soldiers trying to cover up evidence when the Russians liberated the camp toward the end of the war.

When my wife and I married, we bought a painting from an art dealer who had survived the Holocaust. He had been shuffled around to five different concentration camps, eventually liberated from Mauthausen, which specialized in

¹The infamous gateway to the camp bearing the legend *Arbeit Macht Frei*—"work makes (you) free"—was the beginning of their death march once the railroad cars had arrived. The original sign now lies safely in storage at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum due to a thief from Sweden (abetted by two Poles) who had removed it in the middle of the night a few years ago, after which it was returned to authorities.

Address correspondence to Jon Mills, PsyD, PhD, ABPP, 1104 Shoal Point Road, Ajax, Ontario, L1S 1E2, Canada. E-mail: psychologist@sympatico.ca

extinction through labor aimed at snuffing out the intelligentsia. He showed us his number crudely tattooed in indigo on his inside right wrist. He had glazed-over eyes, with the face of a mole. He described how he was pulled from underneath a pile of bodies where the allied soldiers found him alive on his 37th birthday. He took that as a good omen. Dr. Kuchinsky was his name. He had two PhDs, one in music and one in fine art. He tuned camp commandant Rudolph Höss's piano while in Auschwitz. We learned he died of pneumonia. Ironically, he was attacked by a dog while on a walk, went into hospital, and never came out. He was 98.

The headshots of victims plastered on the walls at Auschwitz were most uncanny. I didn't want to look at their faces; they would become real that way—no longer things if I made eye contact. One of them looked like a chicken with a long twisted neck and a protruding Adam's apple. I wanted to laugh inside—it looked like a cartoon. My defenses kicked in and my antiseptic composure returned. Here I was only a spectator; *I didn't know 'em from a load of coal*. But while meandering through another room, the image of a little girl with pleading desolate eyes, holding a stuffy, burned a hole in my consciousness. She looked petrified, like a stone. It could have been one of my daughters. They were the first to be slain. They could not work, consumed precious food, and demanded attention. I will never forget that calcified look. It still cuts.

Almost mechanically, my emotional detachment masqueraded as intellectual disinterest. There was something perverse about attempting to rationalize it, that is, find a reason for why it happened. The barracks, the bureaucratic buildings, the confinement cells, toilets, torture rooms, the reconstructed execution wall, the barbed wire fences, and square wooden signs on posts with the words "Halt!/Stoj!" emblazoned with skull and crossbones just feet before the railroad tracks with large formidable walls and machine gun towers in the backdrop, sealing off the whole compound. The display rooms of empty gas canisters of Zyklon B; human hair; and personal possessions including eyeglasses, shoes, suitcases, clothes, kitchen utensils, children's toys, and prosthetics of all types filled the floors to the ceiling, all encased in glass. Women and children were separated from the men and, in order not to induce panic, told they would be reunited once they were recorded and cleaned up, only to be used as slave labor, warehoused, tortured, hung, shot, garroted, gassed, killed by lethal injection, slowly starved to death, or whipped like dogs.² Gold fillings and teeth were extracted; hair was sent to German textile plants to produce blankets; medical and sterilization experiments were conducted by SS doctors; and after corpses were cremated, their ashes were used for fertilizer, or flesh was turned into soap.

²A certain sick, sadistic competition between soldiers developed in which the whipping to death of prisoners became blood sport.

Abruptly this place started to morph into a scene from *Hogan's Heroes*, a Hollywood prisoner-of-war set, but it was no sitcom. Then the rubberneck Czech or Pole or Roma or German homosexual whose fossilized face was on the wall (labeled in striped uniform) popped into my mind, like a mug shot gallery, stretched out along both sides to the end of the whole corridor, a photo exhibition of dead people. I suddenly have no desire to see the other camp, but then thought, *I had come all this way*. It was here when I began to realize that I was protecting myself, dissociating from the metaphysics of evil.

As I first came upon Birkenau by car, when I set eyes on it from a distance, I was instantaneously struck by its imposing, disturbing presence. It is a monolith of murder. The ominous 25-foot-high "Gate of Death" that demarcates the main entrance and guardhouse, where the freight tracks greeted transports of deportees railed in day and night to be gassed in this massive 425-acre slaughterhouse, was a horrific visual. The compound was a city with hundreds of barracks. Each dwelling was a sty. They housed over 150,000 people at a time, and as many as 20,000 a day were incinerated, their ashes thrown into nearby ponds and fields. The whole experience was as surreal as a slasher film: white frost covered the soil despite the midafternoon sun shining on the creepy grounds littered with buildings in ruin and decay, many having been blown up. Eriest was the intermittent sound of dogs barking in the distant rural countryside, echoes the prisoners would have heard all night.

Birkenau was the calculated achievement of the psychopathic mind; it was built as a death factory through toil by those who were forced to construct their own burial sites, the largest mass extermination facility in all of human history. When one is standing on this land, in the flesh, one's reason is embattled by an obscene refusal to believe this was possible, a grotesque reality the mind is not prepared to encounter. *Who could do this to other human beings?* Here, the German psyche is destined to bear the crucible of judgment, and shame, for eternity.

Walking these massive grounds in a Polish December during religious holiday season added another layer of complexity and irreality to this day. It was bitterly cold, so I moved briskly with purpose, as my arthritis was acting up. I wanted to see the site of the gas chambers. The Nazis used *Sonderkommandos*, which were special work units composed almost entirely of Jewish prisoners, to dispose of corpses after being gassed by taking them to the industrial furnaces. Remarkably, their journals and notebooks were discovered under the courtyards and in graves of bones near the first and second crematoria. The ovens were designed by Topf & Sons, a high-efficiency customized incinerator equipment manufacturer. Engineers were dispatched to Auschwitz to determine the best immolation method. Their conclusion: one well-fed body, an emaciated corpse, and a child produced the best burning load.

There, standing at this site, I abruptly felt a weird sense of draw, more like a seizure that came over me. I wanted to embrace something, feverishly. I had no

idea what I truly wanted, I just felt compelled to internalize this place—to make it part of me, dissociating all along. I needed a symbol to help me metabolize this, to memorialize the innocent dead and unforgivable atrocity that marred the world forever. It was a found object I coveted. My inner self wanted it—the suffering and emotional anguish was every much mine as it was theirs. I was impelled to incorporate this concrete experience into my being, and I instinctively grabbed what I felt my unconscious craved as a natural expression of my internal process. There at my feet, under wet frost, was a porous rock from the ruins of the second gas chambers and crematorium. I picked it up. It was now mine, a part of me—we, us.

Prisoners were forced to roll bodies into trenches, stack them neatly, and sprinkle them with lime. Dissenters would be executed on the spot if they did not instantly obey commands. Dehumanized waste had become an industrial problem. Packing victims into vans and piping carbon monoxide exhaust into sealed compartments on their two-mile journey to gravesites where they were dumped like topsoil at terminus was so horrifying that even Eichmann was distracted from carrying out his assignment of timing how long it took to murder his helpless prey. The terror began at the railroad platforms upon departure.

I felt the urge to walk down the entire railway track leading back to the main gate of the camp where masses were shipped in as many as 50 cattle cars at a time to the unloading area, a hellish place of tears and endings. Their fate was determined by the way they answered an officer's question. Because there was no snow, with open gravel exposed, I noticed a shard of wood from a railroad tie. A splinter, another piece of nature. It felt right in my hand. But the next find was remarkable. Farther down, astonishingly, I noticed a fragment of terra-cotta pottery lying stealthily in the rocks. *Could it be unnoticed after all this time?* As I picked it up, I felt a pressing energy to it. This was a real connection for me, not merely impersonal nature. It was a human fragment, like the fractured lives departing the trains, broken, thrown away.

Inscribed on Christ's cross were the Latin initials I.N.R.I., signifying "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (*Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*). Crucifixion was an instrument of torture designed to prolong physical torment in a slow and excruciating fashion. After the body is unnaturally contorted and nailed to wood through the forearms and heels, gravity will cause the muscles to cramp and spasm, and in the course of a few hours infiltrate the diaphragm and lungs, hence leading to an agonizing demise accompanied by seizures and terminal asphyxiation or heart failure. The loss of one's bowels was an inevitable consequence of such a gruesome, and public, form of execution.

As I made my way back to the entrance of the camp, I walked into the first wooden building beside the death gate. It was a communal latrine with symmetrical rows of open holes extending the entire length. Here thousands of captives who only had 40 seconds at a time to urinate or defecate were herded

in regimented crowds, which happened only twice a day. There, a chip off the cement floor was staring at me, sullied—the human stain.

The mind has an inherent need to symbolize experience it cannot put into words. These found objects summoned me, hence spoke for me, which are now resting peacefully on my mesa, along with other spiritual objects, commemorating what I had dissociated but unintentionally absorbed. It may seem absurd—even profane—to describe this experience as spiritual, but it was nonetheless numinous, something I am profoundly grateful for, as it has expanded my soul.

What we find is not out there, it is in ourselves; something sacred, something hiding, yet always present. In looking back at what I was not able to take in or fully comprehend at the time, these acts of gathering were unconscious endorsements of my need to assimilate something greater into my psyche, namely, a world *pathos* I had been staving off that day, a felt meaning of shared suffering with the *anima mundi*—our psychic scar. But my sojourn at Auschwitz also had deep personal significance for me. My wife is Jewish, and by tradition so are my children, while I am a godless gentile. Perhaps here I incorporated more than just abstract humanity. Yes, I think so; they are me. But as I left Birkenau in a daze with some remnants in my pocket, God was nowhere to be found. And all I can see is that petrified little girl holding her doll.

Contributor

Jon Mills, PsyD, PhD, ABPP, is a philosopher, psychologist, and psychoanalyst. He is Professor of Psychology & Psychoanalysis at the Adler Graduate Professional School in Toronto and runs a mental health corporation in Ontario, Canada. He is the author of numerous works in philosophy and psychoanalysis, including his most recent book, *Underworlds: Philosophies of the Unconscious from Psychoanalysis to Metaphysics*. He won the Goethe Award for best book in 2013 for *Conundrums: A Critique of Contemporary Psychoanalysis* and received a Gradiva Award three times from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis in New York City.