

In Spite of Darkness – A Spiritual Encounter with Auschwitz

(D 2008, 74 minutes, directed by CHRISTOF WOLF)

Study Guide and Information

Summary

Auschwitz – unique symbol of methodically perfected horror, and at the same time a destination for daily streams of tourists. How can an encounter with this place avoid the banality of a tourist visit? This question was asked by New York Zen master Roshi Bernhard Glassman. His answer: the “Auschwitz Retreat”. He invites people of different ethnicity and beliefs to face Auschwitz directly, without trappings. The group will spend five days in meditation, silence, prayer and sharing on the very grounds of the extermination camp. An encounter then happens between Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists. Descendants of victims meet descendants of perpetrators.

The film portrays five participants and follows closely their inner development as they undergo change. Beliefs are undermined, old wounds torn open, reconciliation begins. It is no longer they who come to Auschwitz, it is Auschwitz that comes to them. In silence they bear witness to what happened there.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Usually, the location for a retreat is isolated, tranquil, a place of natural beauty which helps to inspire meditation and reflection. How can people find peace and spirituality in a place of death and destruction? What were the reasons some of the participants came on the retreat? What were some of their hopes, their expectations, their fears? Do you see any connections between the participants? Could you imagine yourself going on an Auschwitz retreat or to a similar place? If yes – why? If no – what discourages you?

Chapter 2: Pain, Suffering, Not Knowing

To what generation do the participants belong? What kind of relationship do they have to the generation of their parents and grandparents?

Which individual emotions are affiliated with Nazi Germany? Do you have any feelings regarding Nazi Germany? Do you have similar questions or reasons as the retreatants?

Chapter 3: Coming to the Retreat

After spending a day in Krakow, the participants prepared to leave for the death camps of Auschwitz. Bruce, a Roman Catholic priest, refers to the excellent relationships between Catholics and Jews fostered by Pope John Paul II. Why does Bruce want to pray at Auschwitz? What is his motivation? Does Auschwitz not silence us? How and why would anyone even attempt to pray there?

Ginni comes from a Jewish background. She wants to honor the dead. Why is that not possible for her in Vermont (USA)?

Chapter 4: Auschwitz and the Retreat

The retreatants enter the examination camp. Their reactions are very different in this place of horror. Bruce is emotionally exhausted. How does he describe his emotional exhaustion? Why is he thinking that it is important to understand his emotions? What are the first

impressions of Ginni, Christiane, Bruce, Ohad and John? How do they experience Auschwitz? What kind of negative experience do they have?

Chapter 5: The Selection Site

The selection site is where the trains and cattle cars came, where they let the people out. It is where the Nazis made the selection of who would go to work and who would go to gas chambers. The impressions of Ginni and Bruce are different. Why do they choose this location for praying? What questions are they asking?

Chapters 6, 7, 8: The Men's, Women's and Children's Barracks

For Christiane, visiting the site is different from seeing films and images or reading books about Auschwitz. What kind of information is not communicated in the media? Seeing the barracks was very shocking for the retreatants and made them sad. Do they remain in sadness or are they changing?

Chapter 9: The Killing Wall

Before the gas chambers were built, prisoners selected to die were lined up at the wall and shot. The retreatants were joined at the wall by Auschwitz survivor Marian Kolodziej and his wife. The group traveled to a nearby church to hear Marian's story and see his "Labyrinth" of drawings. Marian reports that he was on the first transport, and that it was very important for him, inside the camp, to create his own world based on art.

Why can Marian come back to Auschwitz? What kind of effect do the drawings have on John and Ginni? Marian became peaceful, but Ginni's father could not do that. How would you describe her point of view and discussion about her father's reactions?

Chapter 10: The Tower Ceremony

The group was invited to pray for the perpetrators. There was a struggle going on among the retreatants whether it was a good idea or not. Could you imagine praying for the Nazi criminals? What does Ginni say about those relatives of survivors who would stand in front of children of perpetrators?

Chapter 11: The Pond of Ashes

The Ponds of Ashes are the locations where the ashes had been dumped. The ponds are black and ugly. What experiences do Ginni and John have? What is consoling for you? Anything?

Chapter 12: The Final Reflections

John tells that he thought he knew a little bit about the Holocaust, but he was humbled by the fact that there was a lot he did not know about the systemized brutality. Ginni reflects that, in Auschwitz, her father learned how to abuse her. She says that he was humiliated and tortured there, and later became an abusive father. She now felt compassion for him. How can we understand her change?

Ohad says that "I am tied to this place in some mysterious way. I can't say I will not come here again even though it is so difficult." Which facts/experiences/emotions attach him to Auschwitz? Why is he coming back?

Christiane is occupied with the guilt and shame being a descendent of a perpetrator. What she saw and felt before the retreat was limited. Which new quality does she find in this experience of Auschwitz?

Bruce carries the question of Auschwitz as a lifelong question. Why does he say that “Auschwitz does not offer any answers?” What is his belief in the power of love? Do you agree or disagree with these comments about love?

Discuss how this film affected you.

Additional questions for further research and discussion

What is the Holocaust? The Shoah? Where did it take place? Where is Auschwitz? Why has Auschwitz become so well known and notorious?

How many Jews died in the Holocaust? What other groups were “eliminated” in the camps? Why was this elimination necessary, according to the Nazi philosophy?

How does the Holocaust have relevance today? The film ends by saying that genocide is taking place in other parts of the world, today? What does “genocide” mean? Why can’t countries agree on the definition? Where are some places that genocide has taken place or is taking place? What can we or countries or the United Nations do about genocide, now?

Suggested Bibliography

Books

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