

Witness

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What would you have done? What would you have done if you were a German boy, a Jewish man, a Polish woman during the Holocaust? What if you were the neighbor of a Jew who had been taken without warning or reason? What if you were a member of a Polish family that was evicted from their home and sent to a concentration camp? What if you were enlisted to become a member of the Nazi party? What if the German expansion had taken over your home, city, or country? Would you surrender? Would you fight? Would you run? These are questions that prompted my artistic research and exploration. I asked these questions of myself and of four women dancers who participated in this creative and research endeavor. Together we formed a dance company whose purpose was to explore and honor the historical details of the Holocaust. This information became the basis for the dance *Witness*, which was created, in collaboration with the dancers, during the fall of 2009. In this process, I shared information with the dancers through text, movement, and pictures and allowed them time to physically explore and embody the ideas and images. The process in its entirety was inspired by a research trip that I took to Europe and subsequently to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Books, photographs, journals, and videos about the history of Auschwitz and the kind of hellish life that was lived there informed our creative process.

In *Witness*, four women amidst rows of old shoes explore the thin line between humane and inhumane and investigate the questions that are raised about the choice between the two in the face of great adversity. This project serves as an investigation of the transparent yet defining boundary of human nature, drawing directly from the monstrosity and horror of World War II and the Holocaust. The research objective is to reveal the manner in which art can express tangible, complex, and historical research, specifically through the medium of physical dance theater—in other words, to offer an avenue for embodying history both personal and collective through movement, music, and theater. Utilizing research from the choreographer's detailed personal history, conflicting religious background, and intersecting bloodlines, the work blends gesture and emotion to provide a resonating experience. Embedded within this personal research is an imagined but detailed account of Konzentrations Lager Auschwitz. The resulting work, *Witness*, delves into the horrors of the Holocaust accompanied by the somber breath of the accordion (Figure 1).

I knew the task at hand: to explore, through movement, the blend of grief, anger, sadness, and horror that I was feeling at the monstrosity that I had witnessed at Auschwitz in August 2009. I felt compelled to explore the

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physical reaction that I had experienced upon immersion into the concentration camp. This feeling penetrated my mind, body, and soul while visiting this site of mass murder. The physical feeling that I felt at Auschwitz was additional impetus for the in-depth research that led to *Witness*. This physical reaction inspired me to dig deep within myself to investigate the heart of the response. The fuel to investigate this experience was generated from a desire to honor in memorial the millions of victims that died during the Holocaust. *Witness* provides an outlet for the inquiry that has stemmed from this experience.

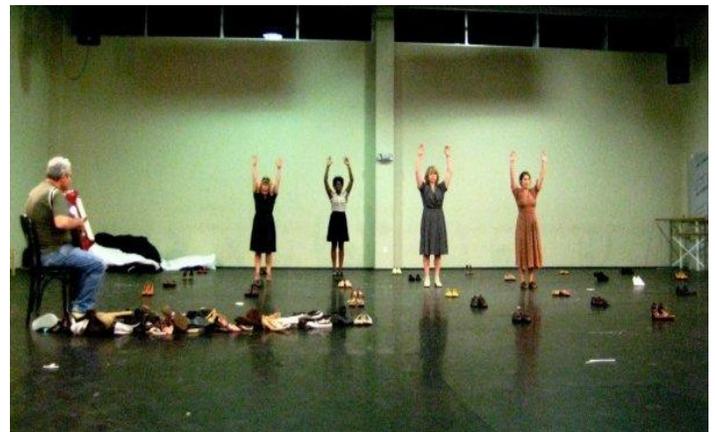


Figure 1: *Witness* in rehearsal during October 2009. Frank Ferraro, Melissa Coleman, Melaney Holtham, Kristen McLaren and Whitney Wilson.

Witness began on Friday, September 4, 2009. In a hollow, emotionless state, I entered into the rehearsal process with four beautiful women. These women were chosen specifically for their maturity, focus, dedication, and heart. The rehearsal process began with gut reactions and the instinctual nature of human beings at the center of the research. I asked the dancers to listen to their deepest feelings, those which are unbiased and unprepared. In-depth research of specific places, dates, occurrences, and feelings fueled us. As discussion began most of our rehearsals, we took a detailed look into the physical history and location of Konzentrations Lager Auschwitz. Deep into the world of questioning how and why the Holocaust had happened, I began questioning myself and my own existence at a physical and emotional level. In this place of honest inquiry, we began to dissect details of my personal experience at Auschwitz, which lead to the detailed exploration of the physical concentration camp itself. I knew before my visit to Auschwitz that I wanted to explore the individual story of each dancer in my company. Therefore, we worked from a place of personal discovery in order to create four detailed solos. From discussion, we

moved to structured improvisation. With a detailed format in mind and an idea to explore, the dancers allowed their bodies to fully deepen into the present moment, thus investigating the manifestation of our discussions in their physical bodies. This method of rehearsal allowed for me to gain new perspective on the deviation between preconceived thoughts and reality. During discussion, I formulated thoughts and ideas on topics of interest. Through improvisation, physical exploration allowed for the underlying truth to shine through, at times confirming the calculated beliefs and other times opposing them.

As a recipient of the University of Florida University Scholars Research Grant, I visited Auschwitz in Oświęcim, Poland on August 8, 2009. Witnessing this site of horror firsthand changed my entire outlook on daily life. I realized, upon my return to Florida, the strength and weight of my experience and the necessity for its exploration through movement. I felt a responsibility to internalize that experience and transfer the ideas to an art form that could share the story with as many people as possible. I feel a yearning and necessity to speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves.

While at Auschwitz, I barely spoke. I saw movement there. I cannot say that it was the millions of ghosts that permeate the walls of the barracks. It was not the wind, as there was no wind that day. It was not the sunshine casting shadows upon the barracks, nor was it the movement of trees, birds, or bugs. I witnessed within myself the dance that was never performed there. I saw it. I stood, mostly in silence. I absorbed the atmosphere like a wide-eyed child. Every image and detail that entered through my eyes dug deeper and deeper into my soul, leaving its mark upon my being.

Throughout my visit at the concentration camp, I felt the full range of human capabilities: a mixture of horror, sadness, anger, disgust, rage and disbelief at the inhumanity that stood before my eyes. I searched for a similar reaction and found it in the photographic journal of Erich Hartmann. He speaks of his wife's reaction at the end of his book. Ruth Bains Hartmann states, "one can feel anger, sorrow, pity, rage, nausea, anxiety for the human race" (101). Walking through the dusty roads with high barbed wire fences on each side, I felt hollow with a complete lack of hope or passion. My humanity was tossed aside, and in place a physical tension had been manifested out of the reality of Auschwitz.

I saw movement happening throughout the camp. Standing in front of the gate that guards the exit of Auschwitz, I imagined the millions of beings who were forced to march under this gate. Four specific locations at the camp spoke to me. The roll call square held hundreds of imaginary beings whose bones were stacked into the standing position. A square of concrete adjoining the camp kitchen pierced my heart, soul, and body in the poignant march that an orchestra of camp prisoners once played there. Brick barracks held three-tiered wooden bunks with

straw mattresses. Piles of bodies, physically during the war and spiritually during my 2009 visit, rested nightly in these rabbit cages. There was also a courtyard surrounded on three sides with a high wall at one end. This "wall of death" was numbing and forced my undivided attention for an unfathomable amount of time, both during my visit to the camp but also in my research and thoughts from that day forward.

These four highlights of my visit formed the basis of the work *Witness*. I realized the impact that each of these physical locations had on me immediately after our first rehearsal as a company. I wrote of the experience in our first group rehearsal and of my personal experience in Europe. These four moments became the entire structure for the piece. Upon looking into these four historical events within the existence of the Holocaust and Auschwitz, the work began to take shape. I choreographed a movement idea that aligned with each of the four physical places that stood out during my visit: the roll call square, the orchestra square, three-tiered bunks, and the "wall of death." I worked with the dancers and informed them of my detailed research on each of the historical events and places. Together, we formed comprehensive ideas and explored them through movement.

We began with the roll call. During my visit to the camp, I sensed the struggle that the prisoners went through. I felt this specifically while standing in the grassy square in the middle of the camp, the same square where masses of humans stood as they were degraded and dehumanized by the Nazis in a morning call of names and numbers (Figure 2). The journal of Sima Vaisman, a Jewish doctor and Holocaust survivor, and the detail with which she wrote of her experience, allowed for my dancers and me to gain insight into the horrific ordeal that occurred each morning at a concentration camp:



Figure 2: Women during roll call at Birkenau.
Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

They chase us out of the block at 4:30 and, no matter what the weather, those interminable roll-calls begin. In rows of five, without moving, we wait for hours in the snow and mud until the time the German S.S. deigns to come count us. Beware, those who dare say a word, move about, or don't stand at attention when the S.S. passes. Beware, too, those who faint. At the summons, everyone must be present and standing. We hold up the ones who fall from exhaustion, so that the S.S. won't see them on the ground. We revive them any way we can when roll-call is over. (33)

While standing near the roll call square, I visualized their physical condition and their mental state. I envisioned their struggle to stand for hours on end. I imagined their struggle to continue living. I felt their hope for change. I sensed the increasing hopelessness in their empty eyes. Paintings and journal entries informed these mental images (Figure 3). I grasped the millions of empty souls, empty hearts, and empty stomachs that stood in the same square daily during the reign of Hitler's personal army, the SS. According to Vaisman's journal,

Every day, we stand outside for hours at roll-call and, after roll-call, they distribute our bread to us, the ration already diminished to a sixth. After the third day we're given a little soup, three or four spoonfuls per person. But each time after this distribution and this roll-call, we have to return to the barn under blows that rain down and, inside, more blows await us. (72)



Figure 3: *Roll-Call 1941/1942* by Wincenty Gawron (1964).
Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

This entry was pertinent to the physical exploration of this historic experience as it assisted the dancer's quest to honestly place themselves among the prisoners of a roll call at Auschwitz. Reading this journal and viewing pictures and drawings assisted us imagine the human bodies that were physically unable to stand any longer and mentally unable to handle the stress of the situation. The first soloist, Whitney Wilson, delved into the realm of these ideas and acted as a moving vehicle for the thoughts that these prisoners would have had during a roll call experience. I saw her as an angel or a ghost flitting among pillars of strength. Wilson danced thoughts of disbelief, heartache, physical ache, the struggle to stand tall, and the battle to stay alive. These details were instrumental in the creation of *Witness* as the process focused on an honest, realistic, and honoring representation of the actual experience.

Once the roll call square was thoroughly explored, the idea was relinquished in order to move to the next solo and the next physical location that held weight and struck a chord within me. Upon entering the concentration camp, one walks under the legendary gate, which states "Arbeit Macht Frei/Work Will Set You Free" (Figure 4). Immediately to the right of this gate is a concrete square, where an orchestra was forced to play (Vaisman 52). Prisoners were forced to play in the orchestra and it was their duty to provide a beat for their fellow prisoners to march to. They served as entertainment and distraction as well as private entertainment for the Nazi officers at their evening retreats, as detailed in the epic movie *Schindler's List*.



Figure 4: Entrance gate to Auschwitz

Standing in front of the orchestra square on my visit to Auschwitz, I could hear the music that this group of prisoners would have played. I felt their presence and heard their songs. I imagined a bow moving across the strings of a violin, heard the rhythm of a beating drum, felt the breath moving in and out of an accordion, and sensed the air vibrating through a horn. The second soloist, Melissa Coleman, utilized these details, as well as photos, paintings, and journals, during her solo (Figure 5). She danced the mental controversy between tough labor and exploitation. Was it better to be exploited for a specific talent and therefore given a day off work? Was this exploitation worth the physical rest? Could you watch your family and friends perform backbreaking duties while you play an instrument at the command of a Nazi officer? Coleman explored the space between these choices in her solo. This was exemplified by her focus, which varied between the accordion player on stage and the three women on stage who were marching to work.

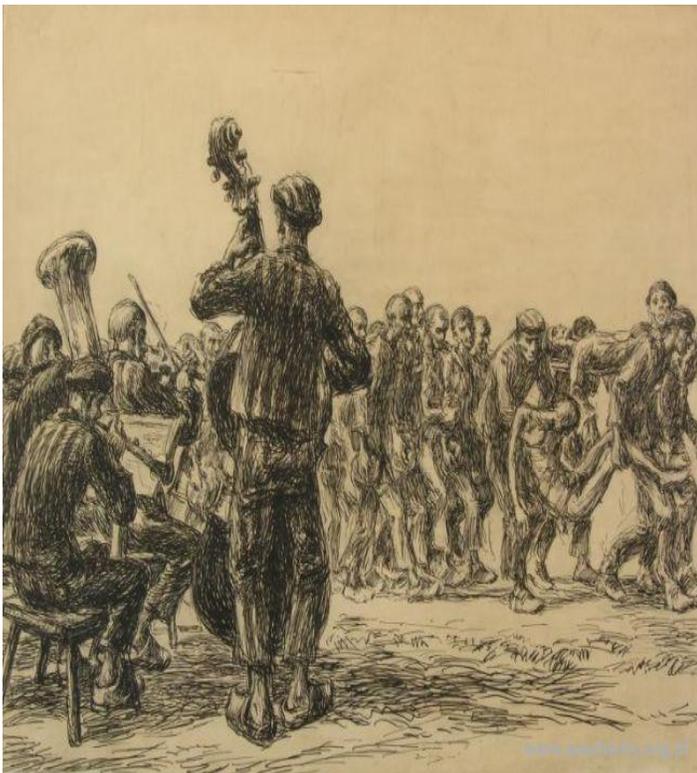


Figure 5: *Day of a Prisoner* by Mieczyslaw Koscielniak (1950) provides us with insight into the horror of the Holocaust. Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

This idea dissolved to give way to a focused study on observation, confinement, and lack of privacy. During my visit to Auschwitz, I was struck by the poor living conditions forced upon millions of human beings. Vaisman speaks of the facilities in her testimony:

Inside, the floor is made of red bricks. On either side of a short, narrow hallway, two passageways, on both sides of which sorts of rabbit cages face each other in three rows, one on top of the other. I can find no expression more appropriate to designate our future

beds than that of ‘rabbit cage’. Each cage is 6 x 3 feet (the size of a body). There are six of us in a cage. We are forced to sleep head-to-foot. We can also sit up but only by bending over, since the cages are low. (31)

I witnessed these “rabbit cages” during my visit to the camp. I was horrified at the idea of hundreds of men, women, and children sharing a bunker at this level of discomfort. Vaisman describes the discomfort: “We spend entire days in these ‘cages,’ sitting completely bent over (we do not have the right to stretch out during the day)” (32). I was taken aback by the idea of cold, tired, sore, and empty bodies piling up and along the barracks. A bed can be a place of comfort and solace, but at Auschwitz the barracks were infested with disease and fecal matter. The straw mattress provided no alleviation for an exhausted body. Blankets were small and dirty, providing no consolation or warmth. In consequence, says Vaisman, “Every night the quarrels begin, for we cannot lie down. We have to lie on top of each other, we can’t turn over at night unless our neighbor turns over; everyone suspects her neighbor of taking one centimeter more than she had the day before, of being too comfortable” (74).

I could imagine the movement that occurred every night in each of the barracks. I could feel this lack of comfort, and I could sense the quest to find one ounce of relief during my visit to the camp. Says Vaisman, “and another day similar to the ones before being sad, interminable, hopeless, in filth and shameful lack of privacy” (35). The Auschwitz archives of photos and drawings added a layer of reality and information to the creative process for this segment of the work (Figure 6).

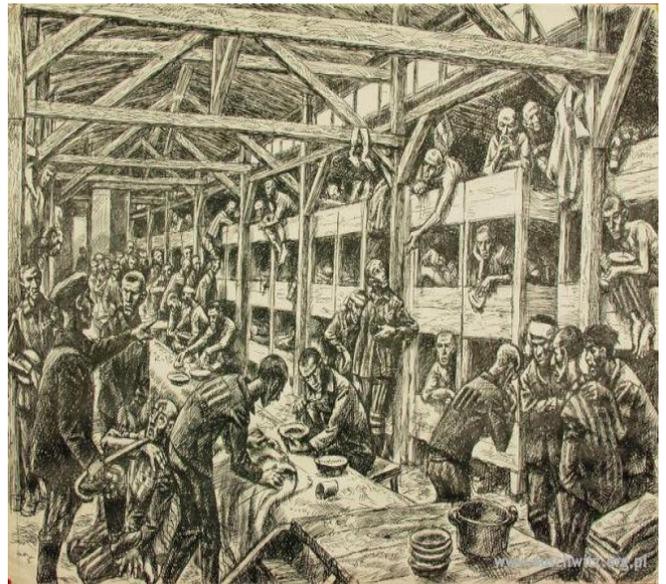


Figure 6: *Inside of a Male Barrack in Birkenau* by Mieczyslaw Koscielniak (1972). Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

Standing in a bunker at Auschwitz, I sensed the struggle for personal space, the lack of privacy and felt disgusted at the horrid living conditions that were forced upon these

human beings. Melaney Holtham assumed the role of surveying these conditions as the third soloist in *Witness*. Her solo began as if she had woken from a nightmare with a quest to evaluate her living situation. She began by witnessing the structure of the barrack. A wooden barrack that has three levels, she concludes. Then, as the women form a strewn pile of bodies, Holtham moves to observe the humanity that coexisted within that structure. Repetition is at the basis of this solo as the first inspection discusses the physical structure, the second examination discusses the human interaction amidst the physical structure, and the third wave of scrutiny blends the structural and humanistic elements of the living conditions to provide a removed and dynamic inspection. The movement was inspired by the architecture of the barracks and from a drawing by Jerzy Adam Brandhuber (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7: *Witness* during rehearsal



Figure 8: *Mortuary* by Jerzy Adam Brandhuber (1949)
Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

As dawn breaks in the barracks, the prisoners are beaten awake. The four women on stage during *Witness* simulate this experience and subsequently, a selection occurs (Figure 9). The three women who have experienced detailed explorations of the physical structure of Auschwitz are sent to the wall of death. In the far corner of Auschwitz

are the penal barracks, numbered Barrack 10 and Barrack 11. Between these barracks is a dusty courtyard where thousands of prisoners were shot.



Figure 9: *Witness* during rehearsal. Melaney Holtham, Whitney Wilson, Melissa Coleman, Kristen McLaren.

During my visit to the concentration camp, I stood silent in this courtyard. I was frozen, unable to move and unable to feel. I stood watching the movement, witnessing ghosts of prisoners walk out of the barracks, line up at the wall, and fall to their deaths. Standing in the middle of the courtyard on a bright August 2009 day, I could see in my mind the way that they fell. I could sense their fear, acceptance, hatred or conceit. I could not tell you how long I stood in this courtyard. Time passed. I felt as if I had witnessed every single prisoner fall during the time I stood imagining and witnessing this movement at the wall. Our exploration of this wall began with the idea of building it. The fourth soloist, Kristen McLaren, explored the idea of shaping bricks through movement. She exemplified the hard labor of the camp by building this wall. Meanwhile, the three other women explored the idea of being sent to the wall and murdered there. These explorations coincide as curiosity and defiance bring McLaren to the wall of death in the final group of dying prisoners. The women then began to explore the forms of punishment that were used at Auschwitz in the penal barracks. This research brought us to the human and physical reaction that occurs when a group of people is punished. They have the capacity to unite. This strong bond merges and strengthens the group that then empowers the women to walk out of the penal barracks and into the light. At this moment in the piece, the women step out of their shoes to symbolize the release of the spirits they were embodying. They unite as a group once more while the audience is given an opportunity to witness the entire spectrum of the work. The women and the accordion player also allow a moment for themselves to realize the entirety of their experience within the piece that concludes with a slow procession across the space and into oblivion.

I chose to work with the accordion for both personal and historical reasons. The accordion has always played a significant role in my life. My grandfather, Stanley P. Kendzior, was a professional accordion player. My yearning to have an accordion player on stage was initiated in order to honor him and the gift of music that he gave to me. During my childhood, most weekends at my

grandparent's home were spent dancing the polka. My grandmother, Victoria Kendzior, and I would dance while my grandfather would play for us. I would also watch him practice almost every night that I was there. My grandfather died in the winter of 2004. I also chose to search for an accordion player because of the history behind the instrument. The accordion is prevalent all across Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. While I was in Krakow, Poland in August 2009, there were accordions everywhere. Within my research of the Holocaust and World War II, I found a prevalence of the accordion in picture and video footage (Figure 10). The signs all pointed to the necessity of an accordion within this work.



Figure 10: An orchestra of prisoners with an accordion leading the pack.

Source: Deutsches Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive)

I found Frank Ferraro through word of mouth. The coincidence and irony in our meeting grew to become an appreciated partnership of choreographer and composer. We worked together to create the score for *Witness*. He acted as a storyteller, speaking the ideas of Auschwitz and the Holocaust with music while we danced them with movement. His focus and dedication added immensely to the piece and his presence transformed the experience for the dancers, the audience, and for me (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Frank Ferraro accompanies *Witness* in performance.

There were also a hundred shoes on stage. Dated in style and worn in appearance, fifty pairs of shoes line across the stage, with dancers sprouting from four specific pairs. Additionally, there is a pile of shoes a few feet high, which spills from the live musician towards the center of the stage. These shoes informed both the process of making the piece as well as the audience who viewed the piece. The idea for the shoes came from a yearning to tell a larger story. The four women on stage were to tell the story of millions of victims of the Holocaust. At Auschwitz, there is a barrack entitled "Proof of Auschwitz." Within this barrack are rooms full of clothing, suitcases, shoes, hair, pots and pans, and other items that were confiscated from the prisoners (Figure 12). My experience in this building was poignant and haunting. Therefore, the shoes became a vehicle for broadening the mind of an audience.



Figure 12: Shoes in the "Proof of Auschwitz" barrack.

Leading me to the subject matter of Auschwitz was a personal and family history rich with traditions and stories. Throughout my own existence, I have heard stories of my grandfather who was a war hero. I have heard stories of the immigration of my family and their subsequent loss in return to Europe. I have heard stories of the Polish traditions from my grandmother. I have heard beautiful and carefree polkas on the accordion of my grandfather. This storytelling has influenced who I am, the ideas that I think, the things that interest me, and the manner that I speak, breathe, and live. Subsequently, it has become the way that I dance. I dance my story daily. My feelings influence my movement, rhythm, breath and interaction with others. This history influences me and those around me. This realization brought me to an all-encompassing questioning of not only those that told their stories to me first hand, but also of all generations before me who have undoubtedly influenced my growth and development as a human being.

This questioning brought me to research my heritage and dig deep into the connections between familial ties. I am of Russian and Austrian heritage on my mother's side. I am of Polish heritage on my father's side. My mother's family is Jewish. My father's family is Catholic. I attended the Center for Positive Living, a trans-denominational spiritual community, and thus my beliefs blend all that has come before me. I have become a meeting point and melting pot

of cultures and beliefs. In this way, my personal history links me to the Holocaust and to Auschwitz. My mother's great, great aunt and her family were murdered at Auschwitz, as were my father's great, great grandparents. During my visit to Auschwitz, I found the name of my relation, Leo Kendzierski #8304, in the book of names (Figure 13).



Kempler	Julian	2045
Kempny	Jan	17240
Kempny	Józef	11773
Kempny	Wiktorja	50677
Kempski	Eugeniusz	12434
Kenderka	Stefan	2831
Kendzierski	Leo	8304
Kenner	Janusz	119294
Kensik	Leon	18451
Kepiński	Stanisław	193641
Kerasiewicz	Stanisław	10155

Figure 13: The book of names at Auschwitz.

The now desolate and hollow camp of Auschwitz was once the junction of very alive, breathing, conscious, dynamic, existing, functioning, growing, knowing, living human beings; human beings with whom I share the same genes, blood, and descent. This knowledge fuels my research. The hunger with which I researched my family's heritage brought me to the decision to visit the concentration camp of Auschwitz. The experience that I had in August at Auschwitz will provide a thirst for understanding that will never be quenched yet is examined through dance.

Based on the experience of this project, I found a connection between my personal history and the fact that every person, place, and idea in this world has different

struggles and successes. Physical environments have an extreme effect on the overall experience of a human being. I discovered the impact that my childhood and heritage have on the woman that I have become. I have also found disbelief at the possibility for the human race to abuse power. The possibility for a person to cross the line between moral and immoral is infinite and this process has taught me that. Erich Hartmann comments on this subject at the end of his photographic study of the concentration camps:

Standing in the Auschwitz gas chamber, I was confronted with the realities of deliberate and cold-blooded killing as never before, not even during the war. It was an experience that I will not be able to forget, it was a reminder of what human beings were capable of doing to other human beings when passion and rage took the place of reason and basic decency. I realized again how easy it is in these days of high technology for the relatively few without conscience to take away the freedoms and spirit and the lives of the many who are at their mercy. I came to understand that I was not safe—that no one anywhere is safe—from these dangers because the line that divides victors from victims—and good and evil—is thin and elastic. (103)

The human race has the capacity to create or destroy. A thought, whether positive or negative, begins a cataclysmic reaction that can be carried out by one or many human beings. Ideas formulated by a single person or small group of people can monstrously affect millions of people. The instantaneous nature of a thought is truly eye opening and its power is enveloping. A thought in one moment has the power to transform into a speech in the next moment and an army in the next. In another context, a thought in one moment has the power to spark conversation in the next, which leads to a physical exploration of that thought through dance. Context informs content. Setting dictates freedom. The freedom of thought, the freedom to be you, the freedom of speech, the freedom to create art all stem from the awareness that one holds over its surroundings. Since opening my awareness to the experience of Auschwitz prisoners, I have found a deeper connection to myself, my history, and my surroundings. I have realized that human beings have an infinite power inside of them that allows for a broad and diverse spectrum of characters to live and evolve in this world.

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