

May 15, 1992

Dearest Hillel,

This is but a preamble to a long phone conversation which should have happened someday soon. If you call me in the early evening, I will call you right back. What I want to tell you about especially is my trip to Poland which turned out to be -- from beginning to end -- a trip about duplication. I began in Warsaw, which, as you know, was completely rebuilt after the war. The Old City was restored to duplicate EXACTLY (in a manner that is simply astounding) the way it once looked, both inside and out. If I had not known this, I would never have guessed that what I was looking at (including a massive gothic church) was NEW. Even the paint is faded to make it look old! The rest of the city, in contrast, is neo-Stalinist and ugly as sin. Where the ghetto once stood, there are "modern" housing complexes, already falling apart. But from Warsaw we headed south to Cracow which remained untouched (Frank occupied the Wawel castle as his private residence during the war) and is undergoing systematic restoration. Especially the churches. From Cracow south again to Auschwitz-Birkenau where we spent two whole days plodding through the mud and another two days debating what we had seen.

The question we had to address was how to turn this horrendous place into a Jewish memorial but that, in turn, was connected to the problem of conservation. It turns out that most of what we now see has been reconstructed since the war: the barbed wire has been replaced at least three times; the guard towers have all been rebuilt; most of the barracks were reconstructed, as was the one still standing crematorium (Birkenau is under the water level; all the foundations began rotting soon after the war). The gallows upon which Rudolph Hoess was hung -- also new. Meanwhile, the "real" artifacts -- the mounds of human hair, of shoes, of prosthetic devices -- are going to rack and ruin due to poor conservation. What's more, even some of the most famous photos -- on display at Auschwitz -- are fake. Like the one of the children being liberated, which was staged by Red Army photographers a few days after the liberation. But that's nothing compared to the real fake perpetrated in these 40 years: the total denial that any Jews died at Auschwitz. Until two years ago, the signs and official publications spoke only of the Polish people and other nationalities. To redress these wrongs, the Poles are now bending over backwards to make amends; hence, our conference. What began, then, as a fairly academic enterprise quickly turned into a theological debate over the stigmata. For Auschwitz has become the last station of the cross for Jewish youth groups, and the US Holocaust Museum, in Washington has been ransacking Poland to collect as many actual stigmata as can fill a museum. They tried to buy the last remaining REAL WOODEN BARRACK in Birkenau to bring back home. The Auschwitz Museum said it wasn't for sale. So a huge sum of money was passed under the table and a Solomonic judgment was arrived at: the barrack was cut in half (I swear to God what I'm telling you is true); one half was shipped to Washington, and the other remains in situ. Movie crews have also been using

Auschwitz-Birkenau as their staging grounds. Until recently, a recreated gas chamber was left standing from some Italian movie (or was it Herman Wouk's latest telescript?) and tourists were led to believe that it was real. So what is real? The officially rebuilt barracks, the half-a-barrack, or the barracks thrown together for the camera? And why is it important that it be real in the first place? Richard Rubenstein warns that too much reconstruction will add fuel to the Revisionists. But after forty years of communist propaganda, trying to convince Poles that mostly Jews died in this place will render Auschwitz superfluous in any event.

The realest place I saw was the Old City of Lublin. It's still a slum and it smells. Turns out it, too, was "prettified" under the Communists in the early 50s, but they did such a shoddy job that the place looks ancient! Still, it's the last medieval walled city in Europe that hasn't yet been gentrified. (Incidentally, the Dominican Church in the Old City was under lock and key the day I was there. The church had just been robbed of its most cherished relic -- a piece of the "original" cross at Golgotha -- and they were taking no chances.)

U Talk to you soon, I hope.