With My Last Breath, Let Me See Jerusalem

The Memoirs of Leo Neuman
Holocaust Survivor
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Preface

Almost all discussions between Jewish and Christian groups begin with or eventually address the brooding darkness of the 20th century, the Shoah, the Holocaust. Holocaust centers, Holocaust studies programs and departments, and Holocaust museums and memorials are being created all over the world. These are important efforts to ensure an accurate memory for future generations. However, a deeper movement is occurring in the hearts of many righteous gentiles to make a teshuva [a turning away from wrong and returning to a right relationship] towards the Jewish people for the Holocaust. It is probably true that people genuinely know each other only when they know and feel each other’s pain with compassion.

For the first time in two millennia, Jews and Christians have the opportunity to put aside their divisiveness and seek reconciliation and understanding. The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU) advocates a respect for the dignity of all people and acknowledges a special relationship between Jews and
Christians. As an academic and research division of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut, and founded upon the principles promoted in the 1965 Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, the CCJU promotes forums for dialogue and study in order to advance greater knowledge, understanding and harmony between religions.

Ordinarily the Center is committed to advancing and publishing the insights of religious leaders, scholars and educators as they contribute to the disciplines of theology, philosophy, history, ethics, aesthetics and pedagogy. *With My Last Breath* is a unique and important CCJU publication because it is a primary source, a first-hand account that will enable scholars and students alike to better understand the Shoah. This book is an invaluable resource for students of all ages, as well as religious leaders and other adults involved in religious education. Most of all, it is written for those students of life who are unafraid to embrace another’s pain in the search for truth and wisdom.
Leo Neuman-1947
Introduction

Leo Neuman, a Polish-born Jew, is a witness to an unspeakable tragedy that must be spoken of, and which can never be forgotten: the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the resultant murdering of millions of Jews. Women and men, children and infants were persecuted, deported and killed for the sole reason of their Jewish origin. Few of those imprisoned in the death camps survived, and none left without deep scars. Leo Neuman survived six years in these death camps, and he bears the scars of abuse and oppression on his body and in his soul. No reader can remain apathetic or detached when hearing of his experiences.

The Shoah seems to be beyond the believable behavior of an intelligent, modern and religious society. And yet its horrors happened in the middle of a Christian culture. The flat statistic that six million Jews died in the Holocaust can never be heard glibly. A present-day visitor can witness the piles of children’s shoes and mounds of women’s hair at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi death camp, for example, precious pieces of evidence of extinguished human lives.
Leo was a witness to innumerable senseless, merciless killings. His experiences are particularly important because they illustrate many aspects and phases of the Nazi scheme to eliminate the Jewish people. These include rounding up the Jewish people, stealing all their possessions, and forcing families to live together in the inhumane confines of the ghettos; to moving them to concentration camps where they were enslaved, tortured and killed; to marching the few remaining Jewish prisoners to their deaths at the end of the war.

Truth is found in the experience of an individual as well as in statistics and objective accounts of history. These memoirs are told from Leo’s perspective and in his voice. He is a sincere person who wants the truth to be known by everyone. By telling his story, he unearths the deep layers of meaning that lie below the crust of facts and statistics about the Shoah. The story of his life helps to give breath, voice and flesh to the dry, pale bones of historical data.

This eyewitness account also provides the opportunity for people of faith to recall the events of history with a religious and moral memory as well as an historical one. The crime of the Shoah leaves a festering wound on this century and requires a thorough and honest memory in order for injustices to be healed.

Some historians would like to discuss and situate the Holocaust in the larger context of all human aggression and war, which presents Hitler merely as one among many barbarous murderers and despots in human history. This book does not venture into such historical
debates. Rather, it is a primary source that hopes to further the understanding and discussion of events in history.

Both Jews and Christians believe in a God who is Lord of history and who acts in history. Similarly, God calls believers, created in His image and likeness, to discern the present signs of divine Providence at work, as well as the ways in which the image of the Creator in humanity has been attacked and disfigured. The 20th century has seen unprecedented destruction and leaves us with choices for peace or war, hope or despair, forgiveness or revenge, faith or doubt, and love or hate. A religious and moral memory is essential if we are to shape a future that will ensure that events such as the Shoah never occur again.

Leo is not an overtly pietistic, religious man. Grace and providence are not words that he would readily use in conversation, but they are realities that have guided his life and most of his decisions. He engages the world as it is, while at the same time, he works for what the world can become. He does not insist that you agree with his beliefs or opinions. He merely asks that you listen to his story.

It is a cruel irony to learn that Leo Neuman grew up in Auschwitz, Poland. And yet, he pleasantly remembers his formative years in Auschwitz with his family and friends. In particular he says that all of his family was of the Jewish faith. In his experience, there was no distinction between a Jewish person and a person of the Jewish faith. Leo recalls several times in his memoirs
that Jewish people about to be killed—even children—would yell out defiantly and faithfully, “God let me see Jerusalem before I die!” This proclamation by the Jewish people spat in the face of the oppressor and made both God and the not-yet-obtained New Jerusalem, real and tangible at the very moment of their death. Leo would often pray, “O God, with my last breath, let me see Jerusalem.”

Leo does not get bogged down in deep theological discussions or doctrinal debates. For him, theology is not only what one believes, but also how one behaves. He says that we are all given the opportunity to make choices, and inevitably others identify us through the choices we make. Hitler made choices, as did the Nazi soldiers, as did Leo. These memoirs are a chronicle of many choices and they leave us wondering what choices we might have made if we were in his worn and ill-fitted shoes.

At the end of his captivity, Leo realized that he was different from the Nazis who chose to behave like animals. Despite his suffering, anger and hate, Leo was still able to extend mercy and compassion to a hungry German woman and her children who were in need of food. He chose not to sink into the mire of contempt or cold indifference to suffering. His moral and spiritual strength allowed him to be merciful, forgiving and compassionate toward others in need. By offering food to this woman and her family, he also offers sustenance for our journey. We become companions in compassion and walk the road of understanding with renewed hope for the future.
This is not the whole story. Not Leo, his wife or his children will ever be able to tell the complete story. Too many days passed in the blur of fighting off hunger pains and trying to survive. Furthermore, it is obviously impossible for Leo to remain completely indifferent and objective when relating his story—especially when considering that most of his family was murdered and his own life was daily threatened for six years. He only asks that we look inside ourselves, beyond our self-interest and prejudices, in order to reach out to those in need and to resist those hateful attitudes and forces that would seek to control or oppress others.

These memoirs are remnants of Leo’s experiences that have been sewn together into the fabric of his life. He is a tailor and furrier piecing together from his past the many remnants of faith, family, friendship and faithfulness into a suit of honesty, humility and truth. His courage, faith, reliance on intuition, tenacity and positive outlook on life are clothes that people all over the world can wear.

Ecclesiastes 3 says that there is a season and a time for everything, including a time to keep silent and a time to speak. For many years Leo Neuman held his breath and kept silent. But the time has come for him to speak and to be heard. This is his story.

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In 1939, Leo Neuman, a Polish-born Jew, witnessed the Nazi Regime’s invasion of his homeland, Poland. Subsequently, Leo’s family and all of the Jewish people around him were imprisoned.

Leo spent the next six years surviving in several concentration camps, narrowly escaping death on a daily basis. This map marks the significant sites referred to in his memoirs.
Soon after the invasion, when hell broke loose . . . they destroyed what they could not take.