

Comment

Shoah

A little while ago I was travelling from Denfert Rochereau in Paris, which itself takes its name from the charnel pit that was created after the clearing of the city's cemeteries over a century and a half ago, to the Charles de Gaulle Airport at Roissy. After a little while, we passed through an unimpressive suburban station in the midst of a large railway marshalling yard. Like most French trains, ours was comfortable and on time. As we sped along I remembered the story of another train that left punctually from the same marshalling yard over fifty years before. At 17.00 hours precisely on 27 March 1942, a long train of goods wagons made its way along these tracks via Laon and Reims to the German border at Neuberg. At 05.33 on 30 March it arrived at Auschwitz. On board the train were 1,112 Jews who had been arrested in France, they were the first contingent in a martyred army of over 22,000 French Jews to end in one of the camps, there to be gassed and incinerated along with six million or more of their brothers and sisters. The name of the station I had passed through was Drancy.

The first group of Jews from France to be transported to the death camps were carefully chosen. They were mostly Jews who had come from the former French colonies in the period between the wars, Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians. It was anticipated that little or no public anxiety would be expressed about the disappearance of this particular constituency. It was not until much later on that the full rigour of Nazi anti-Semitic legislation was applied to the Jewish middle-classes who were more assimilated into French life and culture. The Nazi policy was always to advance slowly, step by step, to defuse any possible opposition. Nevertheless, the uncomfortable reality of the cooperation of hundreds and thousands of basically good people in the facilitation of this slaughter must be faced. The involvement of railway workers, shunters, signalmen, station masters and timetablers all across Europe is clear. The train with its wretched cargo passed along beside ordinary houses, stopped in stations and halted in sidings. The traffic continued until the eve of the liberation of Paris; as the war progressed, it became more frantic. If the 'final solution' was a secret who was keeping it and why?

To mark the anniversary of the 'liberation' of Auschwitz the German Catholic bishops have published a brave statement on the front

pages of the major German newspapers. In it they accept that anti-Semitism existed in many areas of the society of the time and even in the Church. As a result, the necessary resistance to Nazi measures against the Jews was not forthcoming. In 1938 the destruction of synagogues, the plundering of Jewish businesses and the destruction of Jewish homes, the maltreatment and murder of Jews, was not met with any demonstration of solidarity in public protest. The statement goes on to say:

'Auschwitz forces Christians to ask what we think about the Jews and whether our relations with them is in the spirit of Jesus Christ.'

The judicious application of terror quickly breaks down the bonds of human solidarity. The treatment prescribed for Jews by Nazi racist legislation was designed to emphasise their status as *untermensch*. The infamous selection procedure at the Birkenau camp, in itself a blasphemous parody of the divine judgement, the systematic deprivation of identity and status, prompted the suffocation of all self-respect. A number of survivors of the camps, Primo Levi for example, found that sense of contamination too much to live with, bereft of themselves they took their own lives, sometimes decades after their imprisonment had ended.

Many French Jews who had been assimilated into French society soon found that their colleagues ceased to know them when the anti-Semitic legislation began to bite. They became invisible. Friends and neighbours suddenly became a threat. Again, the story of these years has yet to be told fully. In the camps too the way to survive was to become invisible, to press yourself into the huddle when the selection was being made, never to draw attention to yourself or look your tormentor in the eye, to co-operate with the wicked deprivation of identity and personality on which the whole system was based.

Anybody who visits a concentration camp, ruined and empty but full of the shades of the dead, comes away with a sense of contamination. The anniversary of the end of Auschwitz is not a glorious episode. If you ever travel through Drancy remember that silent train passing the curtained windows beside the tracks on 27 March 1942. Remember that those same tracks lead to Auschwitz. Remember!

AJW