

Separate Events, Mutual Understanding: Remembering the Holocaust and September 11th By Caroline Bevan

When I began working at the Tribute WTC Visitors Center in 2006, my main responsibility was to catalogue and organize family submissions of photographs and objects in preparation for installation in the gallery at the museum. From births to weddings, graduations to vacations, I continuously witnessed some of the most precious moments of people's lives. The gallery is only big enough to hold one photo for every victim, and ultimately, I had to choose only one photograph to represent the life of a person I never met. During the process of creating the exhibition, I saw thousands of photos taken on September 11th, showing the destruction of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, but to see the damage done to thousands of lives was overwhelming.

I had a similar reaction as an AJC Fellow this past summer. At the end of our tour at Auschwitz-Birkenau, we saw an exhibition of thousands of photographs found at the camp after liberation. They depicted everyday life of hundreds of people; except for the style of dress, not much separated them from the pictures I see at work. It was painful to confront the familiarity of family and friends, in relation to the nearly incomprehensible history of the camp. I found myself resisting the urge to read names or examine the photographs more closely, as I could not witness the normalcy of daily life without focusing on the knowledge of their ultimate fate.

I am often asked why I am interested in historic events that are so tragic; how can I surround myself with sadness on a daily basis? For me, without the reminder of all that is important and possible in life, there is no reason to reflect on tragic events like the Holocaust or September 11th. Looking at artifacts or documents does not compare to the powerful presence of a survivor or a family member. I believe the personal connection between a visitor and a volunteer at the Tribute Center is more meaningful and significant to both parties than a recovered piece of steel. The same holds true with a Holocaust survivor. When an individual can view a tragedy through the experience of another, it universalizes the effects. Breaking down the barrier between those who were affected and those who were not is the first step in fostering understanding and change. To commemorate and educate, institutions must instill in visitors a sense of empathy as well as a sense of purpose.

As the distance between the event and the present day increases and firsthand witnesses are no longer around to tell their stories, institutions dealing with the history of an event will have to rely on other modes of personalization. In order to avoid becoming solely an entity of the past, specific to one place and one time, institutions dealing with tragic events and difficult histories must continue to evolve and exhibit new and varying perspectives. Our second temporary exhibit will open next week at the Tribute Center, and it will shed a new light on three groups who have, for the most part, been left out of the September 11th narrative: transportation, sanitation, and construction workers. Although their story is not well known, it is crucial to understanding the effects of

September 11th on the city of New York, as well as seeing the good that came out of such a tragedy.

My time at the Tribute Center, as well as my time in Poland as an AJC Fellow, has opened my eyes to the commonality of tragic events. While the circumstances are different and the victims often separated by race, religion, nationality, and more, the understanding and consequences of tragedy are not exclusive to one group or event; many people can relate to the experience. I see the truth in this statement several times a week through comment cards and thank you notes from visitors around the world who feel connected to the events of September 11th as a result of their tour with one of our volunteers or through their own experience with tragedy or even terrorism. Connecting with people who seem far removed from September 11th and New York, in general, is one of the most satisfying aspects of working at a place like the Tribute Center.