Remembrance of Things Present

November 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

While attending the Global Network of PWAs conference in Warsaw, I took a break to visit Auschwitz. As I toured the former death camp, I stared at exhibits--mountains of shoes, luggage and eyeglasses taken from newly arrived prisoners. Looking at the emptied Zyklon-B gas containers or at the “standing cell” torture chambers, it was difficult to fathom both the depth of hatred and the indifference that together allowed this mass murder to happen. Even faced with the proof of gas chambers, part of me wanted to reset the curtain over my eyes.

When I saw the crematorium and wished I hadn’t, this feeling helped me to understand why not everyone who loved me had been in the streets a few years ago trying to save me and other PWAs. To believe me when I told them how bad things were would have been to acknowledge something so horrible they could not comprehend it. Even when confronted with the evidence of mounting deaths and genocidal government policies on AIDS, some refused to see the complicity in their inaction. And today, even people who witnessed firsthand the worst days seem anxious to forget.

But a few years ago, the One Institute in Los Angeles, which houses the world’s largest archive of Gay and Lesbian Jewish history (www.usc.edu/isd/archives/oneigla/tb), took on the task of gathering literally millions of AIDS-related documents and artifacts. Now they are embarding on a massive project of digitizing their records to put them on the web.

The history of the disenfranchised has always been the last to be saved. We must make sure the real history of AIDS--what we’ve suffered and witnessed, not the sugar-coated version that will turn up as a paragraph in high school textbooks--is documented. And that we never forget.

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