

AJC GALA CELEBRATION 2022

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[Thanks to AJC and family.]

Together with a small group of AJC leaders, I have just returned from an intense, profound mission to Central Europe. We met with top government officials and significant figures from the private sector. We visited refugee welcome centers and the Ukraine/Poland border; we brought supplies for the refugees and escorted several of them to the West; we commemorated the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and interacted with the small but re-emerging Jewish communities there. AJC's missions abroad are always extraordinary; this one surely ranks among the most exceptional.

From my kaleidoscopic impressions, let me mention one or two.

First: We went to Poland's eastern border, where Ukrainians escaping the nightmare which is engulfing their country cross into safety. What a remarkable juxtaposition with the Poland of 1939-45! The land which millions desperately tried to flee 80 years ago is today the safe haven for millions of Ukrainian refugees — including a million children, including thousands of Jews — and it warmly embraces them.

The most amazing thing about this migration is that there were no Ukrainian refugee camps in Poland. The recycled school gymnasiums, train station waiting rooms, and the like that now serve as refugee welcome centers — with wall-to-wall cots, colorful bedding, and children's toys — are full every night but empty the next day. No one lingers there. Instead, the refugees are welcomed into Polish homes, enrolled in Polish schools, provided with Polish visas, fed, clothed, comforted, healed. A full 90% of Poles have volunteered for this effort.

Second, as the Europeans emphasized to us, American leadership is essential. They will follow, as long as Washington leads. And that is now happening. After a hesitant start, the US has become

a strong, effective leader of the Western alliance. The change since before the February 24 Russian invasion — when the same countries were skeptical of the US — is huge. As one US envoy told us: “In my 34 years as a diplomat, I’ve never seen anything like it.” These front line states crave American military support, and they scoff at the idea that such aid will provoke Putin. “Putin is provoked by weakness, not strength,” they told us.

We also visited Belzec, a Nazi German death camp in southern Poland. Forgive me for some disturbing remarks that I’m about to make, but this is a disturbing subject.

Let’s be clear: Belzec was a death camp, not a concentration camp. There were no barracks, kitchens or facilities at Belzec. No need. Trains carted Jews here by the tens of thousands. Within an hour of their arrival, they were gassed to death and thrown into huge ditches.

More than 430,000 Jews were murdered at Belzec in 1942, the year of its operation. AJC’s CEO David Harris emphasized a crucial point: There was no Israel in 1942. That made me think: No Israel. No Jewish State. That means no Israeli consulates to provide Jews with exit visas; no Jewish state to provide Jews with a place of refuge; no Israeli diplomats to sound the alarm in world capitals; no Israel to defend European Jewry. No other country in the world was willing or able to save the Jews, and there was no Israel to do so. The result was the Holocaust. So ask not whether it is “appropriate” or “democratic” or “fair” for Israel to exist today as a Jewish state — the only one in the world. You have your answer.

After 1942, Belzec was liquidated; the evidence of its crimes obliterated; its very existence erased from history. Decades later, at the start of the 21st-century, it was discovered by AJC and, in cooperation with the Polish government, restored as a memorial.

Memorials to those who perish in mass catastrophes often include a wall containing the names of the victims. Think the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero in Manhattan, and the Washington DC memorial to American soldiers who fell in Vietnam.

But you can't put the names of 430,000 victims on a wall. Instead, the wall at Belzec contains the several hundred first names of the victims, all common Jewish first names of the era. I stared at the list and suddenly received a huge emotional jolt. There was my name -- my Jewish name: Mendel!

I am the son and grandson of east European Jews, who lived for generations in and around Central Europe, before coming to America. I was born just three weeks before the Nazis launched World War II by invading Poland. If my family had stayed there longer, if I had been born there, I would have been Mendel Ben Chaim – Mendel, son of Chai. Chai was my father's name. It is the Hebrew word for life. But in this case, it means the opposite, because my father's name was also on the wall.

As Mendel Ben Chaim, I would have been perhaps among the 430,000 Belzec victims, but almost certainly among the 6 million Holocaust victims.

But God had a different plan for me. I was born Mark Alcott, in New York city. And so, instead of being a victim, I have had a wonderful life, been blessed with an extraordinary family, engaged in deeply satisfying professional and community activities, and encountered the death camps only decades after the fact, as a visitor. I must always keep that in mind. I always do keep it in mind.

And surely among the very most satisfying of my activities, especially in recent years, is AJC.

Elliott Rose introduced me to AJC — thank you, Elliot — and enabled me to become an activist in this profoundly impactful organization, one of the worlds most important NGOs. Why are we at AJC so engaged in good works and so effective? Because “Jewish“ is our middle name. We never forget that. But we also never forget that “American“ is our first name. And so we promote American and Jewish values worldwide.

So thank you American Jewish Committee for giving me the gift of participation in your affairs and for bestowing on me this wonderful award.

And thank you dear family, friends, colleagues and comrades for sharing this glorious moment with me.