

Art's Testimony - Part 1

by Art Katz

Art Katz shares his transformative journey from Jewish atheism to an encounter with Christianity, shaped by profound experiences and philosophical struggles.

Scripture: Psalm 34:18, John 13:34-35, Romans 3:10, Ephesians 2:4-5

Topics: "Gods Pursuit", "Radical Conversion"

Description

This sermon reflects on a Jewish atheist's journey from rejection of God to a profound encounter with faith, triggered by deep questions about human existence, experiences in post-war Germany, and encounters with unexpected acts of kindness and love. It explores the transformative power of God's pursuit, mercy, and love in breaking down barriers of bitterness and skepticism, leading to a radical shift in perspective and a newfound openness to biblical truths and Christian faith.

Transcript

not because it's of particular value to myself, but I think it's so descriptive of modern American Jews and so much the statement of contemporary Jewish life, born in New York and Brooklyn in the Depression years, and having been a lifelong atheist. My earliest impression in my adolescence was the rejection of God as being a fable, and that men needed to have the courage to face the realities of life without any kind of dependency of an imagined kind. And so I drifted, as so many Jews of my kind, into socialism, Marxist Institute, and was a merchant seaman at the age of 17 looking for adventure, for meaning.

Growing up in the city of New York, the city of eight million compounds, every question, and coming to adolescence during the World War II time, and the statistics of the six million of my kind who were annihilated by that civilization that we most admired, intensified every question of my life and my existence. My whole conscious young Jewish life was with the question, why? How am I to understand human existence itself? If you could picture me as a kid going to high school in Manhattan, traveling on the subways every day with heavy tones of philosophy, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, trying to find some kind of an answer in this crowded subway car, you have a picture of Jewish perplexity seeking for answers. And coming out of the dark tunnel of that underground subway onto the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan, and looking at the skyline, I always saw a blinking neon light below, Jesus saves.

I couldn't think of anything more humorous. Someone has joked, Jesus saves, but Moses invests, and that's as much understanding as that phrase meant for me at that time. And so the Lord allowed such a life to have its logic, and I was in the Army in the early 1950s, in the Korean War time.

I should have gone to Korea, but by the accident of having a last name Katz beginning with a K, I was taken out from that segment of the middle of the alphabet and sent to Germany rather than to Korea, the nation which I despised above all nations because of the Holocaust and what we suffered at German hands and our strange love-hate relationship with that people. Strange to say in my almost two years in that nation, in the nation yet broken after the war, the heaps and mounds of ruins yet remained in the city of Munich and in other places, I was strangely drawn to this Germany and felt myself more at home in its streets and cobblestone lanes than ever I had felt in Brooklyn. And so the whole sweep of our German existence, my own name, had a haunting effect upon me to continue to deepen these very questions.

The first thing I did that the earliest Jungkipper of my time in Germany was not to go to a synagogue, an atheist does not attend the synagogue, I went to Dachau. So the first chapter of my book is my experience at Dachau as a Jew who came on forbear, looking with great indignation upon the Germans. They were the culprits, we were the good guys, we were the victims at their hands.

But it took something of the enormity of the concentration camp itself, the barbed wires, the barracks that yet remained that have since been removed, and the place of annihilation, the place of cremation, the ovens, to break something. I can remember leaning my hand on the smokestack and something broke as the magnitude of what I was touching was greater than my categories. And somehow I realized that what I was touching obliterated my simplistic view of good guys and bad guys.

To top it off, the Lord had me to sit in a train compartment on my way back to Munich, thinking myself alone, only to look up at a blond-haired and blue-eyed man sharing the compartment with me without arms and without legs, a multiple amputee. And I looked upon that piece of broken humanity, a victim of the recent war, and I didn't know whether to have contempt, hatred, or pity. The poor man was writhing in pain, trying to adjust his artificial limb with his hooks till finally I couldn't bear to see him squirm, and something that was of my better nature took hold of me.

I got out of my seat, put my hands on his limb as he directed me to adjust it to ease his discomfort, and then had me to sit down and offer me a cigarette. And we were just the classic German and Jew, side by side, victims of the recent tragedy, and just speaking in a broken German-English conversation, trying to touch spirit. And I realized as I looked at that man, I'm looking for the telltale signs of barbarism and cruelty that I could see in my enemy, but all I saw was a man's face and the thought that their cats but for the grace of God go you.

You're only a Jew by circumstance. You're only born in Brooklyn, New York. You're wearing an American uniform.

Had you been born in Germany, you would have been the one putting the bodies into the ovens. And that truth never left me and set in motion the circumstances by which 10 years from that time the Lord saved and brought to the knowledge of himself this consular Jew, ever seeking after truth and never finding it, but set in motion for salvation by the recognition of a verse in scripture that I did not know, not knowing any scripture, being the biblical illiterate that we modern Jews essentially are, that there's no man good, no not one, that if God were to mark iniquity, who can stand? And so with the return from the army and the GI Bill and becoming a teacher, the high school dropout makes good. My mother began to quell, to enjoy her son attaining his success, but the remarkable thing is that success became bitter ashes in my mouth.

I was not your ordinary history teacher. I chose history because it was the closest vehicle toward philosophy and ethics and morality. I could raise great and ultimate questions for my students, but I found

myself incapable of answering them.

My gods have failed. Marxism had failed. The revelation of the Stalinist period and the disillusionment that had come to many socialist Marxist idealists of my time collapsed as we saw the reality of what that system had in fact produced.

On top of that, I had married a German girl that I had met in Germany who was herself schizophrenic, a former member of the Hitler Youth, and ventilating upon me and her psychic and emotional condition the anti-Semitic hatred that had just been enacted to the tune of six million, and the remarkable thing was that my humanistic faith in my good reason and solid compassion and the well-meaning intentions utterly failed in the confrontation that came through this German woman in that condition. I realized I had no answer at all. And in that condition, I took a year's leave of absence from the teaching profession.

I could not go on, put a pack on my back, and I traveled for 14 months through Western Europe and the Middle East looking for philosophical answers for what else shall a Jewish atheist seek? And in the course of those 14 months, the Lord, whom I did not know, was in pursuit of me as the hound of heaven, picking me up off the side of the road by a strange new quality of human beings who were not Jews nor Gentiles, and yet I could not quite locate them, for they had a dimension of something that I had never seen in either Jews or Gentiles, being themselves born-again Christians, which was a phrase that later came into my vocabulary, but it was this love, it was God that prompted them to pick up this dangerous-looking man off the side of the road, angry and bitter and vexed, and take him into their cars, take him into their homes, and extend to me mercy and kindness and love and open to me the Scriptures and begin to speak to me in biblical terms, which was a dimension wholly outside of my secular and atheistic understanding. And so that I reached the point of some attempt to communicate to me, you have, there's no way to describe what I was as a Jewish atheist and radical. I was not just mildly contemptuous of religion, I was an avid and vehement opponent, and of all faiths, Christianity was for me the most apparent, because I equated Christianity with the Holocaust.

It came out, it issued out of a Christian nation. So any attempt to communicate to me was met by the most vehement refusal. I think there was a, or if I remember correctly, one or two Christian teachers on my faculty who sought to share with me, but only in the most limited way, because I would cut them off in a preemptory way, not being able to hear.

It took a crisis of my life being broken at its foundations to make me to be void of my own clutter, my own vocabulary, my own convictions, my own categories, my own pedigods, to put me in a place to hear for the first time.

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