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A Close Encounter

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A rolling stone gathers no moss, I assume. At least, that was what I was told. Every time I travel, I gather something new. However, this time it was special. It was in June 2005 when I was travelling in Western Europe, including Italy. I was travelling by train from Rome to Venice, known as Venezia, a beautiful city on water, where transportation is primarily by boat. I took a night train from Roma Termini Station going to the Venezia Santa Lucia Station. In Europe, I often take the night train especially for long distance journeys where I could sleep comfortably while saving money. Hotels in Europe are relatively costly. Moreover, trains in Europe are very good – very clean, run on time and with good speed. For tourists like us from the USA, travelling in Europe by EuroRail is an attractive option. Prices have gone up recently. When I visited Italy for the first time in 1986, it was about \$200 for three weeks in first class. One could take any train within a zone consisting of multiple surrounding European countries. I went to Italy again in 2013 and travelled 5 bordering countries: Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Prague and Germany. The EuroRail cost me \$795 for 10 days. At the time of this incident, France was also included. Now, that option is no longer available.

Anyway, by the time I woke up in the morning, the train was entering into Trieste, leaving Venice 1 hour behind. It was a terminal station. After getting down, I spent some time in Trieste before taking another train to come to Venice. Trieste is an interesting port-city in the northeastern part of Italy. Throughout history it has been influenced by its location as an important seaport and became the melting point of multi-European cultures, particularly from Austria, Slovenia, Latin, and Germany. I boarded Trenitalia, a superfast train that can run at about 190 miles/hour. It was supposed to reach Venice in less than an hour without any stop in between. After running for half an hour, the train suddenly stopped. Someone looking like a ticket checker ran from one end to the other end saying that the train stopped because of an accident involving a biker. Later, I came to know that it was the bike that went under the train. Nothing happened to the biker. Anyway, I was thinking what should I do next instead of waiting that long. I thought I was the only one in that compartment until I saw an older woman at the other corner when she stood up. She also saw me and came to me. I realized that she was feeling very uneasy and anxious.

“I will be late”, she said to me.

“Late for what?” I asked.



“I have to go to Roma to deliver a talk,” she said. I was curious, and asked her “what sort of talk?” “On Auschwitz,” she said. “What is that?” I asked. “Don’t you know, it was the largest concentration camp?” she frowned at me. “Ah, Auschwitz! Yes, I know. I have seen [Schindler’s List](#).”

By the way, Auschwitz, located in Poland, served as the largest concentration camp for the Nazi regime under the command of Adolf Hitler. Millions of people were exterminated in that camp during the Second World War (1940 – 1945). More than a million prisoners died in Auschwitz, around 90 percent of them Jewish. That lady, Marta Ascoli, never saw *Schindler’s List* or knew who Steven Spielberg (the producer and director) or

Steven Zaillian (the script writer) was. She then narrated her story. At that time, she and her parents were living in Poland. She was then 17 when Nazis arrested her and her father wrongly assuming they were Jewish. They were transported by train to the concentration camp. On the way, she lost her father forever and later came to know that he died in a camp. She was moved to Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste (March, 1944) for three weeks and then deported to Auschwitz II–Birkenau where she was detained for one year (April, 1944 – March, 1945) before being transported to another camp.



Marta Ascoli all'età di diciannove anni

[Auschwitz](#) consisted of Auschwitz I (the original camp), Auschwitz II–Birkenau (a combination concentration / extermination camp), Auschwitz III–Monowitz (a labor camp), and 45 satellite camps in its network. Auschwitz I was the first building constructed to hold Polish political prisoners, starting in May 1940. Later, other buildings were included in the network for exterminating millions of prisoners in gas chambers. What horrific incidents she had to experience in the camp! But, she was a survivor. Her mother was alive and always tried to locate her daughter. Finally, Marta was rescued by the Russian army from Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northern Germany, southwest of the town of Bergen near Celle. Thank God! After her release, she became a teacher. At the time of the encounter with me, she had retired but still traveled to various European countries delivering talks on humanity. She also wrote a book in Italian ‘[Auschwitz e di Tutti](#)’ (meaning, Auschwitz and All), narrating her story. I took that opportunity to take her

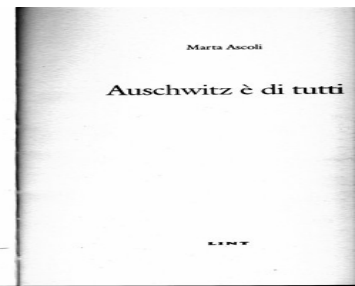
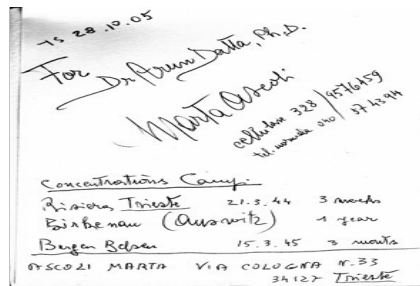
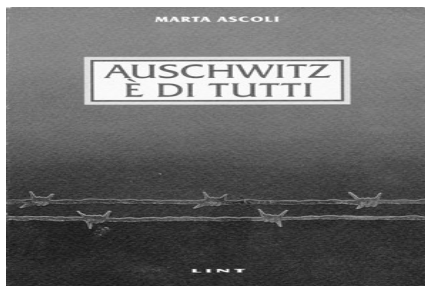


picture. Incidentally nobody else was there in that particular compartment for taking my picture with her. Nevertheless, I was delighted when she presented a signed-copy of her book to me.

After touring Venice and some other places in Europe, I finally returned to San Diego with a feeling that I brought a piece of history with me. For most of us who are born long after [WWII](#), her horrific experience is just a chapter in history that we read in a book without any personal feelings. But for those like Marta, who survived that Holocaust, such memory never died. Among the many millions who went through the Holocaust and finally survived, there are not many who are still alive. After returning to San Diego, I sent a copy of the picture to her address (via Cologna, n. 33, Trieste 34127) following my promise but did not get any reply. Although that snail mail was never returned to me, I fail to know whether she received it.



Last year (September, 2013) when I went to Italy again for a tour, I planned to meet her again but could not because of a tight schedule. I don't even know if she is still alive. She will be 87-years old by now. Anyway, I regret that I could not make my time to go to Trieste, although I was in Venice this time also. Nevertheless, I am still trying to find out whether she is still alive – a last piece of history that ties me with the Holocaust.



Her signed coordinates in the book 'Auschwitz e di Tutti' – a treasure indeed.



Arun is living in Carmel Del Mar since 1993. Presently, he teaches computer science in National University, La Jolla. His research interest is on Biomedical Informatics. Some of the software tools developed in his lab are used by the community health organizations including IDPH. His group is also developing Body Sensing System that collects streaming physiological data in real-time for health monitoring. Among his hobbies, he likes to travel around.