

Lessons from Auschwitz project

As part of the Lessons from Auschwitz Project run by the Holocaust Educational Trust, two Bryanston pupils visited Auschwitz-Birkenau to gain a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and, on their return, to share their reflections on the experience with others. Here is what one of the pupils wrote immediately after the visit.

I want to tell you a bit about my trip yesterday, because I don't know if you have ever been to Auschwitz, but it was so incredibly thought provoking. Ollie and I were discussing the trip and both of us said we couldn't find the words, then I pointed out that that was no use and a complete cop-out, so I'm going to try to do so. We first visited Auschwitz I, which wasn't unlike Auschwitz Birkenau; purpose built as a death camp, but originally a complex of 20 Polish army barracks, which was then expanded to hold Jewish prisoners when its role morphed into an extermination camp as the final solution emerged into the (paradoxically) concealed forefront of the German war effort. It was unlike anything I had expected, and what was unnerving is that if you did not know what had occurred there, the 'blocks' looked like nice houses on a pretty estate, like a little village. This was, of course, until you saw that there were 500 people living in just one of these buildings, and you saw the straw on which they slept, and the cold they had to endure. The displays were within some of the buildings, it was freezing and we were being talked to through headphones by the guide, who was brilliant. As you probably know there were hundreds of thousands of shoes, prayer shawls, suitcases, crockery, all of which belonged to people who believed they were being relocated and had brought only the best: house keys, trinkets, photographs, clothes, suitcases with names and DOB painted on by three-year-old kids. There was a display of children's clothes, of toys and smashed up china dolls and photos of little children who had been torn from their families, even one story of a woman who had given birth as she exited the cattle cart on entering Auschwitz II, where a guard cut her umbilical cord and tossed the baby aside. One of the most shocking displays, I thought, was one of train tickets, where we discovered that, because people believed they were moving to be resettled, they bought their tickets and paid their own money to get to Auschwitz Birkenau, where many of them died within hours of arrival.

We then went to block 14 and when we arrived at room five, it was the only room where photos weren't allowed. Of course I had heard about this display, but we weren't warned that it was coming, so when we entered the room with the three tonnes of human hair it was beyond shocking, because however personal 'stuff' is, clothes, shoes, jewellery, it's just stuff, products of the consumer world in which we live. Whereas this was real people, part of their appearance and even identity. It wasn't the kind of hair you see at the hairdressers, snippets that are slightly repulsive and alien when not connected to your head. It was full heads of hair, still in shape where it would have been moulded around the scalp. There were ponytails and plaits that still had worn ribbons around the end and the piles were taller than people and extended far back into the room. I was gagging and holding back tears, it was 140,000 people's hair, whose bodies were now ash and dust because the dead stuff on their head was worth more than their lives, and even these three tonnes were only a fraction of what was collected in Auschwitz I, II, and III. These people's identities were sold, processed, recycled into clothing, bedding, everyday objects, showing the multi-faceted way in which the dehumanisation process can result in terrible things.

The gas chamber in Auschwitz I was declared inefficient for extermination, triggering the purpose built Birkenau for the final solution, but it is the only gas chamber and crematorium still existing. It was freezing and confined and the holes in the low ceiling through which canisters of Zyklon B were dropped could still be seen, showing chinks of the blue sky above. This sense of suffering was tangible and shocking, there was a sense of everyone being uncomfortable, as we were ushered through the room where the original ovens were still there, open. Auschwitz I was more shocking than it was haunting. The close proximity to the humanity of those murdered, the overload of information we were fed and the way we were hurried along or pushed around by other groups, but unable to hear their chatter or sometimes even laughter because of our headphones allowing us to hear the guides voice only. The oddest thing about Auschwitz I was the shocking lack of respect, (perhaps just an alternative way of coping with the surroundings) that characterised the other

groups. We were barged around, overtaken, kids were pushing each other around on the stairs, joking and laughing, scratching their names into the walls, because even now, only 70 years following this mass genocide, it has become just another part of history. Even this, which was for myself and Ollie still incredibly emotionally resonating, had become a boring school trip about something that had happened to other people in another time.

We then went from there to Auschwitz Birkenau, and the only way I describe it is that for the first hour and a half of our time at Birkenau it didn't feel real. As if it was a model recreated site, and the swarms of chattering tourists and the crisp sunshine made it feel somewhat fake. We walked through the gates we have all seen in films; we saw the railway tracks and the platform where people's fates were decided; we visited the barracks in which 700 people were living with dysentery and malnutrition, where people were beaten, shot and dehumanised. It was all shocking, the stories we heard about 37-year-old women found weighing 25 kilograms, and the job of cleaning the gas chambers where the prisoners found their friends and family while clearing before the next group of selected victims came in to 'shower'. It was so different from Auschwitz I. There was less human evidence and therefore it was less emotionally shocking (for me at least). There were less artefacts and belongings, fewer photos, just the skeletons of buildings and the setting which was much less provocative than shards of people's lives that we had seen in Auschwitz I.

However, at the end of the tour we visited the building in which those chosen not to die immediately but to work were taken to be washed and given clothing. We followed the building through, just as the prisoners would have done, and in the final room there was a display of photos found in luggage brought by the Jewish people, sorted and identified, of mothers and fathers, of laughter, holidays, boyfriends and girlfriends, weddings, graduations, babies, outings, celebrations, accompanied by stories of the individuals to whom the faces we saw belonged. I felt a real sense of privilege to get this snapshot of people's lives and what struck me was that these were the kind of photos you see on the walls but don't pay much attention to when you go to someone's house. They showed that what we had seen all day was not only the evidence of the extermination of a faith, but of individuals, of people who worried about what they wore, and fought with their parents, joked, cried, had nine-to-five jobs.

After this we went to the memorial, at the end of the railway tracks where Rabbi Marcus led a memorial ceremony. As the psalms and poems were read, I looked around me and noticed, that we were the only ones left, our group of 200-odd students, two individuals from each school, in a site of 400 acres where so much suffering had occurred. The Hebrew sung by the Rabbi was so incredibly moving it brought me to tears, and as he sung we had gone through that key ten minutes of the evening, during which the light goes from a rosy twilight to dusk. As he finished I raised my head to see that, apart from the areas lit, not brightly, by the streetlights lining the railway, the rest of the camp had been plunged into an eerie darkness extending for hundreds of acres in both directions. I could see the fences, and beyond that the hazy outlines of the barracks, a slight mist descending behind the barbed wire. At this point during the ceremony the realness of where we were, what had happened there hit me. During the day it had felt like a tourist attraction, with a closing time, full of statistics, but as the sun set and the temperature dropped, it became more and more unnerving. During the day it was difficult to imagine what the place would have been like, full of skeletons in striped pyjamas, but at night it could have been 1944 with prisoners in their barracks, silence from all around, no tourists and nothing except the dim streetlights to give away the fact that the camp was empty and that it was all over. It became so real that the prisoners had remained, there wasn't a closing time where everyone left and went home, and it became so unnerving that lives had been lost on the ground on which we stood. In the darkness and the dim outline of the barracks it became easy to picture individuals, and I must admit I became quite frightened, but after we lit our candles and reflected in silence for a while, Ollie and I walked slowly back, sometimes discussing, sometimes not. The prevalence of death, the humanity of the place was beyond tangible, it was present and with us, and the walk back seemed far longer than our walk up in the sunshine. At the gate we looked behind us and paused to see the line of candles in the distance. For me it felt odd

that we could just leave, just like that we could walk out of a place that had been a prison for so many.

The one really difficult question that the guide suggested I didn't mention to the Rabbi was the one I'd like to address in assembly. Some people say we need not remember the Holocaust in too much detail, because anti-Semitism has peaked and mass genocide of the Jewish faith will not happen again, and they may be right in the latter part of that. However, I think what makes the whole place instill a feeling of discomfort in us, is having to face the reality that the Nazis were not a monster race, they were people. They were not lunatics or ruffians or thugs, many were educated and the majority were perfectly sane. It is so unnerving because the reality is, if the roles had been reversed and the Germans had been the persecuted and the Jewish the persecutors led by a dictator like Hitler, the consequences are likely to have been the same, because we are all people. Thousands of ordinary German citizens were working nine-to-five jobs in coercion in the destruction of human life, and thousands more cooperating with this wider genocidal war effort. This was not, and is not, a country wracked with terrible people, and the importance of this is, I think, tantamount to the importance of the remembrance of the Jewish loss. I know there are no ifs and buts and only what happened but for me an understanding that demonising the Nazis does the opposite to teaching us to learn from the Holocaust is what is important to translate back to people at school. For demonising the Nazis and saying they are different from us allows us to skate over the atrocities that were committed by man. I think it is so incredibly important to understand that the Holocaust is not just an awful part of history, but one that shows us to what extent human nature can be twisted and manifest itself in tragedy, something that we need to learn that applies not to the Nazis as a monster race but as people, meaning the capacity for such things exists in all of us, and it is this that it is necessary for us to understand and overcome.

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