

Lessons from Auschwitz

Back in June, sixth year pupils were told of an opportunity to take part in the 'Lessons from Auschwitz' project, organised by the Holocaust Educational Trust. The project involves taking part in two afternoon seminars and a one-day visit to the former Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, in order to then pass on the lessons learned to our schools and communities. A number of pupils applied for the trip by writing an essay explaining their reasons for wanting to go. However, only two students are allowed to go from each school in Scotland, and so Alasdair Morton-Teng and I were lucky enough to be chosen.

Our first real introduction to both the nature of the trip and the horrors of the Holocaust was at an afternoon seminar at the Carlton Hotel. We learned about the importance of understanding pre-war Jewish life, so as not to wrongly assume that 'the Jews' were one mass of very similar people. We then heard an incredibly moving testimony from a Holocaust survivor who was born in an extermination camp. During her pregnancy, Eva Bergman's mother, Anka, witnessed the horrors of Auschwitz and endured six months of forced labour. If the Nazis discovered a woman was pregnant, she could be sent straight to death in the gas chambers. Amazingly, Anka's pregnancy went unnoticed for months, and Eva was born weighing a mere three pounds (her mother only five stone) in Mauthausen death camp. Just two days after her birth, American soldiers liberated the camp. Hearing Eva's account of her mother's experiences was a deeply emotional and personal introduction to the horrors of the Holocaust, and helped us to recognise the individual stories behind the statistics.

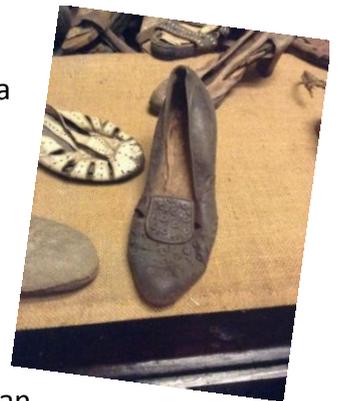


After the seminar came the trip to Auschwitz itself. At 7am pupils and teachers from all over Scotland gathered to receive an unforgettable experience. A short flight later we arrived in Krakow. We were soon introduced to the difference between Jewish culture and Polish culture when we passed cemeteries on the way to Auschwitz 1. Polish cemeteries were very well maintained, had flowers on every grave and looked inviting. In contrast, when we visited a local Jewish graveyard the graves were destroyed, randomly assorted and looked dilapidated which immediately linked us to the idea of segregation between races.



Once we reached Auschwitz 1 we reached the main gate with the sign above it that reads "Arbeit Macht Frei", which ironically translates to "work makes one free". The ensuing tour of Auschwitz 1 was a surreal experience of sadness and confusion. With a headset on our ears that explained important details and information about the camp, we were given a guided tour of the Auschwitz 1 site and museum. The millions of lives lost were clearly represented by the staggering amount of Jewish items in the museum. One room

displayed a shocking amount of Jewish hair shaved off victims who entered the camp. Pots and pans, glasses and suitcases were amongst the other items available to view behind glass panes. This display involved the human element as we were only made aware of facts until that point.



Birkenau, the main labour camp, was the largest of the more than 40 camps and sub-camps that made up the Auschwitz complex. About 90% of the victims of Auschwitz Concentration Camp died there – approximately a million people. It is important to note, however, that not all of the victims of Auschwitz were Jewish. The Nazis also targeted gypsies, Poles and other Slavs, and people with physical or mental disabilities.

Standing on the railroad unloading platforms where the infamous selection processes took place felt incredibly surreal. With a simple wave of his hand to the left or right, one SS member could determine the lives of thousands of innocent men, women and children. The weather – a warm sun and perfect blue sky - felt unfitting for a place of such horror and despair. A tour inside one of the barracks used to house the Jewish people was an important reminder of how the Nazis seemed to view the Jewish men and women as ‘sub-human’. The barrack was extremely cramped and three-tier wooden bunks were intended for 15 prisoners, for a total capacity of more than 400 prisoners per barrack.



Our guide also introduced us to the scale of mass murder and the magnitude of activities involved in the extermination of Jews. From creating propaganda to selling tickets to the death camps, there were all sorts of jobs that didn't directly involve killing Jewish people but were, nonetheless, of vital importance to the success of Nazi concentration camps like Auschwitz. This linked us to the role of the bystander. As Edmund Burke famously said, “all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” Nazi Germany was a prime example of this, and Alasdair and I have decided to make it an important focus of our ‘next steps’ project.

As the tour of Birkenau came to an end, we were shown a wall of hundreds of Jewish family photographs found in suitcases. This was a poignant end to an incredibly difficult and emotional day. After learning all about the atrocities that took place in Auschwitz, the photos resonated with us on a much deeper level, and we were both struck by how ‘normal’ they were. From cheesy holiday snaps to candid shots of a baby in his mother's arms, the pictures were strikingly similar to photos that our own families seem to have taken over the years.



Just before we got on the coach to drive back to the airport, the group of over 200 students and teachers held a memorial service to remember all those who were killed in the Holocaust. We each lit a candle and sat for a moment in quiet reflection and remembrance. A Jewish rabbi recited a traditional prayer and a number of pupils read out poems about the Holocaust that struck an emotional chord. One poem, entitled ‘A Dream’ was written by 10 year old Avraham Koplwicz, a Jewish boy killed in Auschwitz. It described his hopes and dreams for the future, which included ‘taking a seat in a bird with a motor’, ‘marvelling at the Euphrates and the Nile’ and ‘basking in the enchantments of this world’. For no reason other than the religion he was born into, Avraham, like millions of other people murdered by the Nazis, was never able to pursue these dreams.

Visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau was an experience that has made a deep emotional impact on both of us, and one that we feel will stay with us for many years to come. Although it may have affected us in slightly different ways, we both feel passionately that the task of remembering and educating others about the Holocaust is one of vital importance. Through work on our “next steps” project, we hope to ensure that we can pass on the lessons learned to both the students and teachers of Broughton High School and the wider community.

By Katherine Wright and Alasdair Morton-Teng