

Our plane landed in Krakow just after 10.30am and we made the journey to Oswiecim, the town that neighbours Auschwitz-Birkenau. One of the most important elements of beginning to contemplate the Holocaust is to understand not just what is there, but what is not there anymore.

The Rabbi on the trip with us had told us there was no correct way to feel at Auschwitz - some laugh, some cry, some don't say anything at all, to some it's a tourist attraction, to others, a pilgrimage. As we walked round and explored the brick houses that had been used to imprison people, people just like us, I felt what can only be described as a weight settle in my stomach. It made me want to cry from frustration and grief and find every single person who might have been affected to apologise.

Each room at Auschwitz has been turned into an exhibition of the artefacts left over when the camps were liberated. We looked at everything from handwritten register of prisoners, to photographs of the various detainees. There were massive collections of pots, pans, crockery and boot brushes. We moved into another room, and as we approached the window, we found ourselves looking at human hair. When people were murdered at Auschwitz, they ensured that every part of the body was mutilated and used.

The last part of this camp that we visited were the gas chambers - a room disguised as a shower room where victims were told to get clean, some were even handed towels and soap to maintain the illusion, before they were murdered.

From there, we moved to Birkenau where the railway tracks had been extended to run all the way into the camp, meaning that as soon as the prisoners left the trains, SS doctors were able to decide if they were fit enough to face labour, or only good for the gas chamber. There and then, families were separated, and more than half were sent to their deaths. We visited a few buildings where our guide explained how thousands of individuals were dehumanised - cramped on bunks, having even their food and opportunities to use toilet facilities limited.

We then travelled back to the airport, got on a plane, and I got back into Birmingham at around 11. My experience of Auschwitz lasted only a day, but it was an experience that will be with me for the rest of my life. I found myself mourning millions of people who I had never met and would never get to meet. I had never felt so disgusted by human cruelty, or so in awe of the human condition's ability to carry on.

Amy Burrows (Year 12)

As much as that day was a long one, it is a day that I know I will remember for the rest of my life. On the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2019, Amy and I visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum with the Holocaust Educational Trust, where it is estimated that around 1.1 million innocent lives were lost.

Upon arriving in Poland, we travelled to our first destination of the day: Rynek, the main market square in Oświęcim. This was where we learned about pre-war Jewish life, and how entire Jewish communities were destroyed, torn apart by the anti-Semitic Nazi regime. So many innocent people; men, women, children, anyone who was identified as Jewish, were taken from their homes, and were only able to take a select few of their most prized and precious possessions. Then they were taken to ghettos, concentration and death camps, separated from their family, and most were sent to death. We also visited the site of the Great Synagogue, where the Jewish community went to worship. It was harrowing to discover that while before the Holocaust the town was predominately Jewish, in the present day the Jewish population is almost non-existent.

Our second location of the day was the first part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum: Auschwitz I. We were guided around the camp, where we were told stories about how horrifically people were treated there, how they were stripped of their precious possessions and their clothes, their heads were shaved, their photographs taken, and they were given blue and white striped, often ill-fitting and dirty uniforms. Many of their valuables, if deemed suitable, were sent to Canada and sold. We were guided around many rooms and spaces, and we were able to see the iconic gates to the place, which read at the top "Arbeit macht frei", meaning "work sets you free". Walking through those gates sent chills down my spine knowing what happened on those grounds, and it was as if I could feel the presence of all the people who died there, and it was an indescribable feeling.

In many of the rooms, personal belongings that had been taken from the victims had been preserved. In one room, there was a pile of glasses and monocles, many pairs broken, but many still perfectly intact. In another room was an expanse of hair. All of the hair that had been shaved from the heads of the victims, in all colours and styles. We were told about the fact that there were still hair accessories left in, children's bows and pretty hair slides, hair ties and headbands. It was horrific, and the image of that room will remain in my memories forever. There was a room full of people's pots and pans, cups and plates, and you could see the chips and cracks from not only where they had been thrown carelessly, but from where they had been used and loved and dropped by their owners, the paint fading from use and the pans scratched by spoons and forks in the home. It really reminded us that the victims were not just their numbers, or their contribution to the statistics, but real human people who were wrongly murdered, their homes and their families and their lives taken from them. There was a room full of all types of brushes; a room full of every imaginable type of shoe, ranging from adult shoes to tiny children's shoes; a room of suitcases and bags, many with names hand written onto them; and a room full of prosthetic limbs: arms, legs, hands and feet. That room was personally the most horrific and emotionally impactful, thinking about the fact that many people were stripped of their necessary body parts, and many would not be able to walk, or hold the hands of their family, their children, as they were possibly sent to their deaths. Walking outside the buildings, we were shown the Wall of Death, where many people were lined up, shot and killed. We were taken through the grounds, where the floor was uneven and rocky, and we were able to see the high walls and barbed wire.

We were guided through a crematorium and a gas chamber, where the victims were slaughtered and later, their bodies were thrown in and burned. We were shown to the 'Book of Names', where in the centre of the room was a huge book. It was full of 4 million of the estimated 6 million Jewish lives that were taken during the Holocaust. There were Annes, Bellas, James, all names and all ages.

The book was huge, and it took up most of the space in the room, and pages were yellowed and battered, but the words inside were still readable.

We were then taken to Birkenau, the second part of our visit. This is where we were shown the barracks, the living areas for the men, and the women. We were shown where the orchestra played, just next to the places where people slowly starved to death on their meagre rations. We walked through the living areas, and the washing stations, and we saw the cramped spaces, unsuitable for human life, and certainly not fit for the hundreds, maybe thousands of people who were stuffed into them, when they were only really 'fit' for a few. We saw the rickety structure of their beds, and the lack of privacy given for them to wash in dirty water. It was hard to truly comprehend the sheer size of the place. The railroad ran through the camp, and it took us a lot of time to reach the other side. When stood at the far end of the camp, we were unable to see where we had started from; we were too far away. We were guided to another crematorium, which was no longer a standing building, and we saw the lake where the ashes of cremated victims were dumped.

The final part of our visit was a memorial service, where we walked through several walls of photos recovered. The photos were of families, of friends, of children, parents, grandparents, pets, extended family, grandchildren, anyone and everyone. We held a minute of silence in respect for the victims. A Rabbi gave a powerful speech, where he told us that there were still people who denied that this event even happened, or tried to. He told us that if we were to hold a minute of silence for every victim of the Holocaust, we would be silent for 2 whole years.

Overall, this experience is one of the most emotional and impactful experiences of my entire life, and I could not recommend the visit enough.

Lily-Ella Holgate (Year 12)