



Auschwitz Trip 2019

Over the course of November, 4 year 12 students took part in the Lessons from Auschwitz Programme, run by the Holocaust Educational Trust. Emily, Sam, Ben and Caitlin took part in two seminars, alongside 200 students from all across the North West. Their first seminar prepared them for their visit to Auschwitz, looking at the way in which life had changed for European Jews from the turn of the century until the late 1930s. They also had the opportunity to hear from Holocaust survivor, Mala Tribich, who had been sent to Bergen-Belsen in 1944 and remained there until the British liberation of the camp in 1945. This gave our students a real human insight into the Holocaust. It is easy to rattle off numbers when it comes to a mass genocide such as the Holocaust, it is much harder to acknowledge that each one of these numbers represents an individual who had their own life, experiences and stories to tell. Mala was able to provide our students with a human perspective into the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their allies and the impact that continues to have on the survivors and the next generations.

The second part of our course consisted of a day trip over to Krakow to see the concentration camps. After a very early start (4am at Manchester!), we arrived in Krakow and had the opportunity to briefly explore the Polish town of Oświęcim, which was the closest town to Auschwitz Concentration Camp and once had a thriving Jewish community. Now, nothing remains of the Jewish community that once made up over 50% of the population, except the ruined site of a synagogue and the desolate Jewish cemetery, which is now under lock and key. From there, we travelled the short distance to Auschwitz I. This former army barracks now serves as a memorial museum, documenting the atrocities committed there and serving as a memorial for the estimated 1.1 million people who lost their lives there. Each barrack contains an exhibition, detailing what took place there, the lead up to the Holocaust and the lives of those affected. Some of the rooms were challenging, emotionally, as it put into perspective the sheer number of people who had passed through the gates of Auschwitz and whose lives had been lost or destroyed as a result. A particularly poignant block was Block 27 which contained the Book of Names. This book contains over 4 million names of people who are known to have perished in the Holocaust, either at one of the Concentration Camps spread across Europe or at the hands of the Nazi regime in some other fashion. Yad Vashem, the International Holocaust Trust in Israel, are working to increase that number all of the time. As it stands, there are roughly 2 million people who were victims of the Holocaust whose names are not known, predominantly because those who would have known them have also perished. Yad Vashem has dedicated itself to researching the lost names with the aim that one day, all those who lost their lives will be remembered and memorialised.

Students also had the opportunity to walk through a gas chamber, following the path that would have been taken by the innocent and unsuspecting men, women and children who were murdered there. This was a particularly haunting experience and as our guide, Piotr, said, you could feel the ghosts of those whom had been lost around you as you walked through.

From there, we went to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the site of much of the mass extermination of the Jews. Students walked along the infamous railroad tracks up to the front gate before being overwhelmed by the sheer size of this camp in comparison to Auschwitz I. This part of the trip was harder to see, both in terms of the emotional connotations of the area but also because by this point, it was much

darker and had started to rain. But we were able to see some of the barracks where the prisoners of the camp would have lived and the squalid conditions they were forced to live in. From there, we went to see the ruins of a gas chamber, which was exponentially bigger than the one we had walked through in Auschwitz I.

The final part of our day in Auschwitz consisted of a look into the lives of the individuals who had lost their lives or who had survived Auschwitz. When Jews arrived to Auschwitz, they were stripped of their possessions, many of which lie in the exhibitions in Auschwitz I. But Auschwitz-Birkenau contains an exhibition of their personal photographs that families and individuals had brought with them. From there, historians have been able to piece together information about these people and display them for others to see. We also read poetry and letters that had survived the Holocaust, often written by Jews either living in ghettos at the time or by some living in Auschwitz. One striking thing that came out of hearing the stories of the victims of the Holocaust was that many of them clung to hope that one day they would be saved. They wrote letters detailing what they would do if they left, dreaming of a future that they did not know was coming. They wrote to the future generations about their experiences so that we could never forget, not knowing for certain that there would be a future generation to pass this on to. There were small acts of resistance all across the camp, with people trading their food rations for the opportunity to pray and practice their faith in the way in which they were accustomed. These acts of rebellion showed the true nature of the human spirit and condition and were overwhelming to consider. We also heard from Rabbi Shaw, whose grandfather had lost his life at one of the concentration camps spread across Europe. His speech, detailing what had happened to his grandfather and the rest of his family subsequently, was thought-provoking and rousing. His commentary on modern day Anti-Semitism made for uncomfortable listening but was extremely important and gave a real example of how tragedies such as the Holocaust initially start. These atrocities did not start over night but built over time and people turned a blind eye to it and did not stand up for what was right when it was needed. His speech pushed for activism, engagement in politics but most of all, kindness, tolerance and respect.

The final stage of the programme took place a week after our trip to Auschwitz and was an opportunity for students to explore what they had learned and about the emotions that they had experienced whilst at the camps. It also gave them an opportunity to think about their Next Steps. As Ambassadors, our 4 are expected to use what they have learnt and bring it into the wider school to educate the rest of our students. We can't wait to see what they are going to come up with!

"Remember only that I was innocent
and, just like you, mortal on that day,
I, too, had had a face
marked by rage, by pity and joy,
quite simply, a human face!"
Benjamin Fondane, murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1944

