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Educational visit to Auschwitz Birkenau

In March 2018, I was given the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau with the Bogdanow grant. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the University, and the late Professor Fanni Bogdanow, for such an incredible opportunity.

As a History student, I have always been very eager to gain a closer and more intimate understanding of the Holocaust which, due to its enormity and barbarism, is very difficult to truly comprehend. I arrived in Krakow – a breathtaking marvel – with a copy of Etty Hillesum's seminal wartime diary under my arm. In it, Etty, a Dutch Jewess, chronicles her life between the years 1941 and 1943, illustrating her turbulent mental health, blossoming religious faith, precocious genius, and unceasing optimism in the face of pervading Nazi brutality. In November 1943, aged 29, Etty died in Auschwitz concentration camp, and with her life and words under my arm I endeavoured to experience Krakow's Holocaust history in a deeply personal, and altogether more human way.

During my first day in Krakow, I visited Kazimierz, the Old Jewish District. Having experienced something of a bohemian renaissance since its destruction during the Nazi Occupation, and ruination under the subsequent Communist regime, the quarter is utterly magnetic – charming balconied buildings, cosy, artistic cafes, and stunning street art make it a total spectacle. Yet what makes the area so moving are the tangible remnants of heritage and tragedy in its various nooks. Schindler's Factory Museum was astounding – a must-see due to its inventive, informative, and immersive curation, as well as its haunting illustration of Jewish Ghetto life. Kazimierz is also home to the empty chairs memorial at Ghetto Heroes Square, commemorating the murdered Jewish inhabitants of the city's ghetto. This incredibly moving memorial serves as an abstract symbol for the 20,000 human lives subjected there.

The following day, I went on a guided tour of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was utterly unreal. An estimated 1.3 million people were subjected to its horrors. As many as 1.1 million are believed to have died there. Auschwitz I was simply overwhelming. Though small, the site was home to cells, a shooting wall, torture yards, plus numerous displays of confiscated belongings – huge piles of hairbrushes, shoe polish, glasses, photographs, shoes. (The inmates referred to the barracks containing their treasured belongings as 'Canada', synonymous at the time with wealth.) One cabinet contained 2 tonnes of shorn human hair, intended for manufacture in the Reich. Needless to say, the cabinet containing children's clothes was particularly, profoundly moving.

Birkenau, by contrast, was very vast, and very desolate. Many of its wooden cabins – where 400 would sleep, often more than 8 to a bunk, despite having been originally designed as stables for a mere 52 horses – had been burnt as the Nazis fled, though evidence of the inhuman labour and terror conducted there was ubiquitous. A particularly harrowing experience included standing on the train platform, where as many as 75% of the exhausted prisoners transported from across Europe were sent immediately towards the gas chamber, often oblivious to their fate.

Our tour guide was excellent – she told us the story of Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who volunteered to die in the place of another inmate; of the Jewish Sonderkommando who, after realising he must murder his own mother in one of Birkenau's gas chambers, comforted her and entered the chamber alongside her. It was the contrast of these very human testimonies amidst the unfathomable barbarism of camp life which made the visit so illuminating. And yet ever more

unfathomable. The level and scale of cruelty, even as it stood right beneath my feet, was as difficult to comprehend as ever before. We can only hope it will never have to be comprehended anew.

“I have already died a thousand deaths in a thousand concentration camps... In one way or another I know it all. And yet I find life beautiful and meaningful.” – Etty Hillesum