

“Come here you free citizens of the world. Whose life is safeguarded by human mortality and whose existence is guaranteed through law. I want to tell you how modern criminals and common bandits have betrayed the morality of life”

- Zalman Gradowski

11 million. Victims, people, humans. Lost, killed, murdered, in the holocaust. 6 million simply because they were Jewish; attacked, starved, enslaved, beaten and ultimately killed, simply because they were Jewish. For our generation, the holocaust is something from textbooks, a piece of the past that makes you feel somewhat ashamed to be human, a dark part of history. But no textbook, no documentary, no quote, can fully prepare you for a visit to Auschwitz death camp. To stand in a room where hundreds of thousands of innocent people lost their lives, to walk in someone's last steps knowing it won't be your last, is a reality we will never face but experienced in a small way on our visit to Auschwitz on the third of October.

We were delighted to be chosen as ambassadors in the Lessons from Auschwitz programme by the Humanities faculty. About a week before we left, we had the honour of meeting a survivor of the Holocaust, Eva Clarke. She recounted the story of her mother, who beat the odds and managed to survive the holocaust, even managing to give birth to Eva alone, luckily the day after the Nazis ran out of gas. She told us of the deaths of her family members, members that she never even got the opportunity to meet, including her own father. As we looked at the photos of her family before the holocaust, it struck us both how happy they all were, they looked like any other family you would see on the streets today, smiling with the younger children pulling faces at the camera. This struck home for both of us as it highlighted what we already knew, that these people were just like us, they laughed, they cried, they lived, just like us. They were human, but yet their horrific endings and the way they were treated by the Nazis was anything but humane.

We also learned about the location of numerous concentration camps, simple red dots on a map that symbolises a place of absolute hell for millions of people. What we never realised is how close to our very front doors these injustices were occurring, as we learned that one of the channel islands was actually home to one of the concentration camps. It was so close to us in Britain, to our families, but they had little to no clue about the horrors that were occurring just across the ocean.

At this same seminar we also discussed the perpetrators of these crimes, before we believed them to be monsters, pure evil, devils, as how can someone of a good nature commit such disgusting acts? But to our surprise they too were just like you and me, normal. They didn't have red eyes, or horns popping out of their heads, they were ordinary, average people. They themselves had families, and even lived in the same communities as their victims, they could have been neighbours, friends even. We were speechless, how could a human do this to another human? How could an adult, sound of mind, be able to watch a child walk to their death? The revelation stuck with us, as this wasn't a natural disaster that couldn't be avoided, this was the work of men, with the sole intention to kill.

We began our trip to Auschwitz at Oświęcim, a town where over half of its residents were Jewish before the holocaust, minutes away from the infamous concentration camp that left only 10% of them alive. One of the key features in the town was a grand river that ran through the town, it lay lifeless, like a piece of art. We soon learned that the picture perfect river was actually another casualty under the Nazi rule, as its waters had been polluted with the ashes of the victims of the holocaust. These ashes could have so easily been the ashes of families, of children, that played and swam in this very same river, as this could have been their home, and is now their unmarked watery grave. The story of how the town discovered the pollution is truly sickening, as it was found out by children who had been swimming in the river and came out covered in the ashes. These ashes could have been their teacher, their babysitter, their best friend, and these children had no idea.

We then walked onto a large piece of grass along the river bank, it stood blank in the middle of a street, looking completely untouched. It was here we were asked why we thought we were standing here right now, we looked around only to see a few abandoned dog poos laying under the trees, bewildered as it looked like just another place you would take your dog back home to go to the toilet. It was not until our attention was drawn to a small plaque that this was actually the site of the Grand Synagogue that once stood as a key part of the town. The Synagogue before the holocaust was a pillar in the community, with even the Kaiser visiting it himself. It was a social hub for families to connect with likeminded people and to feel safe, at peace, connected with their religion. When the

Nazis came however, the Synagogue was burnt down, with not even a brick left over. All that was left to show for it was a small plaque, nothing else to even suggest that it was anything other than a patch of grass for your dog. On the same street, just a few blocks down lay a dominating church, tall and prominent, you would have had to be blind to miss it. The contrast to the now non-existent synagogue further highlighted to us the attempt to wipe one whole religion, one entire race, from history itself, simply because their beliefs were a bit different. Leaving the town to go to Auschwitz 1, we had time to reflect on everything we have learned so far. The town wasn't dark and cloudy, the people weren't traumatised, it was your typical sunny town, with your typical standard residents, just like the one we called home back in the UK. You wouldn't know all the lives, all the families, all the communities missing from it, but yet there were. So many.

As we arrived at Auschwitz 1, it was truly breath-taking. The building to which we were first greeted, stood tall, solid, strong. Unlike your usual building of history, this was not crumbling before our eyes, reminding that this tragedy is not as long ago as we would like kid ourselves to believe. As we walked further into the camp we see the famous archway, with the words imprinted on it translating to "work sets you free". As we looked up at this, we couldn't help but wonder how many people before us had read these very same words, because the reality was that these people were not free. Most would never again know the feeling to be free until their untimely deaths. In the series of blocks, all tied together with an endless supply of barbed wire was home to a series of experiments which would be performed on the mentally ill, the disabled and even children. Block 4 was home to a dark room, to which we caught videos, mere glimpses, into these Jewish people's lives before the holocaust. With our earphones on, we could hear their laughs, their songs of happiness, their voices, ringing in our ears. One of the videos, only a few seconds long showed a young girl with soft blonde hair skipping rope singing what sounded like an age old nursery rhyme. She looked around 6 years old, realising the camera is there, near the end of the video she smiles and sticks her tongue out cheekily before dissolving into the darkness of the room. We moved on to a book of names, which filled an entire room. These names were the names of the Jewish people who had been identified in the holocaust, however out of the 6 million people, only 4 million were named. This made us realise, the 2 million people who do not have a name, something so simple, who remembers them? Who grieves their memory? We then get a look at some of the things found when the camp was ultimately ceased. A whole wall of a corridor showed heap after heap of hair, with only an inch of glass separating us. As we looked closer we saw a single plait of a child's hair, still tied together with a red silk bow. We were told that two tonnes of human hair was behind that door, only a mere third of the hair found, abandoned by the Nazis. Along with the hair was series of other objects; clothes, shoes (including children's), jewellery, even toys left to rot in Auschwitz. Every item, every fabric, every strand of hair represented someone who had their whole identity stripped bare off them. As we headed out the block we were met with another corridor, this one filled with mugshots of just a few of the victims of the holocaust. These photos were a huge contrast to the videos from earlier, as the people in the photos were not smiling, they looked defeated, tired, broken. Getting face to face with these photos, staring these people in the eyes, made us realise yet again how ordinary they were. They did not look like criminals, they did not look like animals or savages, they looked lost, damaged, and hopeless. As we ventured out to one of the gas chambers, our eye was drawn to a large house just 5 minutes down the row. The house itself looked stunning, standing alone looking out to the rest of the camp we automatically assumed it had been built after the Holocaust. We then found out the Commander of the camp who brought his family there to live with him. He lived in this house with beautiful gardens and exotic flowers, inside one of the most destructive concentration camps in Poland. His wife described her time living there as some of the 'happiest years of her life'. This only highlights the fact that the people in charge of these camps were human beings who felt love and compassion towards others, just like me and you. But yet they were guilty of committing the biggest genocides in history, normal family men. So how do we differ? Who says we aren't capable to do the same? As we look onto the door of the gas chamber we realised that this for so many was their last time outside before they were stripped, and gassed, to their deaths. As we stood in the gas chamber silence fell upon the whole group, words can't explain the feelings felt in that room in that minute. To stand where so many have fallen, to listen to the silence of a room loud with so many tragically taken lives was heart-breaking to say the least. As we ventured out of Auschwitz 1, we couldn't help but feel a sense of guilt, as unlike so many innocent mothers, fathers, children, we could leave the camp, alive.

We stared at train tracks that laid before Birkenau, a place where people only lasted a mere 40 minutes before their fates were likely to be sealed. As we got into the camp we were astonished by the size of the camp, roughly about the same as one of our own home towns. The buildings were all calculated apart perfectly, emphasising that this place did not fall from the heavens, but it was in fact carefully and over a long period of time, constructed by humans for the sole purpose of the holocaust. They say it's what you don't see at Birkenau that affects you the most, and at first we didn't understand the saying until we saw the gas chambers that had been left mere rubble. They had been destroyed by the Nazis right before the camp was liberated, crushing all 6 huge gas and cremation buildings, like nothing happened. As we walked to look at the final two gas chambers and photo memorial we walked through a wooded area. This area would have been the exact walk the Jewish people in the camp would have taken to the gas chamber, believing they were simply going for a shower. The path itself was surprisingly stunning, as the sun shone through the trees and the autumn leaves snapped at our feet we couldn't help but be horrified. How could a walk to their deaths be so pretty? And the saddest part is that after years of being locked away like an animal, it would be easy to understand how the people might believe even for a second they were going to a better place. It was between these collapsed gas chambers where we held a memorial service for all the victims of the Holocaust, which was perhaps one of the most moving experiences of our lives. The Rabbi injected so much emotion into his speech it was impossible not to become overwhelmed with grief and anger. Anger for the victims, but above all anger at the fact that it was humans that committed this horrendous genocide, humans that stole the lives of over six million innocent people because of their race, religion, disability or ethnicity.

It is truly amazing that one day, a mere 24 hour trip, could have such a lasting and life changing impact on our lives. The trip highlighted just how lucky we are, to say we are free, to say we still are treated with even an ounce of human decency, more than what they were subject to in their last days. We are so privileged and honoured to represent our school in this amazing project which helps ensure that this event is never erased from the world's mind. The Holocaust was the biggest genocide in human history, it is an event that should never be forgotten as, like George Santayana says **“those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it”**, we should learn from the mistakes of the people before us and instead remember. Remember the mothers, brave and fearless only wanting the best for her family. Remember the fathers, strong and kind, separating never truly knowing what happened to his family. Remember the children, innocent and pure, watching their parents and grandparents being led to their deaths. Remember their names, and remember the ones that were even stripped of that. Remember their stories. Remember the victims of the holocaust.

Zalman Gradowski was a Polish prisoner of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp during the Holocaust in occupied Poland. He arrived in November 1942 aboard a Holocaust train from Kalabosin. In order to record the horrors of the holocaust for future generations, Gradowski wrote a secret diary, describing his life and the camp. He buried his notebook in the camp as a time capsule. He didn't survive Auschwitz, as he was murdered in 1944, however his words still live on to this day as a grim reminder of these atrocities.

“Dear discoverer of these writings! I have a request of you: this is the real reason why I write, that my doomed life may attain some meaning, that my hellish days and hopeless tomorrows may find a purpose in the future. I pass on to you only a small part of what took place in the hell of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is for you to comprehend the reality.” - Zalman Gradowski

We have been asked to speak at the Scottish Parliament on Holocaust Memorial Day 2020, to share our experience as Ambassadors for LFA. The audience will include the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon.

Ross Eaton and Ellie Robertson S6 North Berwick High School

