

A Visit to Auschwitz - Birkenau (March 2010)

Arriving at Cardiff Airport at an unearthly hour (4.30am) I could sense the excitement and tension of sixth form students on their trip to Poland - a trip unaccompanied by parents - to put what they had learnt in subjects like History or RE into context, to gain a greater understanding of what they had learnt in lessons at school or college and see first hand evidence of what had happened at Auschwitz Birkenau- the infamous concentration camps which are forever a symbol of man's inhumanity to man. This trip, run by the Lessons from Auschwitz Project, has been funded by the Welsh Assembly Government for the next two years.

There was a buzz at Cardiff airport that even the kitchen staff had picked up on.

'There's a trip going to Auschwitz today' commented the lady serving breakfast. 'I wish I was going it is so important to know about these things' She proceeded to tell me that her mother had lived under occupation in Norway and she had heard these stories as a child.

Everyone in some way has a story to tell. Before going on the visit the students had heard the personal testimony of Zigi Shipper, a holocaust survivor, and the effects these events had on his life. No one could be failed to be moved by his words.

On arrival in Krakow the first stop was the Jewish cemetery in the town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz) to see the tomb of the last Jew who had lived in the town and died in 2000, hear of the anti Semitism that still exists and prepare themselves for what was to come by considering and analysing these events in history and how a little town can become synonymous with man's inhumanity to man. We proceed to Auschwitz 1 for a guided tour of the camp. On arrival, the eager and excited chatter of the students changed to one of quiet respect. Walking through the famous gates with its sign 'Work Sets You Free' it looked exactly as seen in films and documentaries- the camp layout in neat rows, belying all that had gone on there. It stands as a testimony to German efficiency - an organised killing machine. A deathly hush came over the students as they tried to comprehend all the evidence laid before them- spectacles, shoes, human hair, prosthetic limbs, the shooting wall, torture chambers and the place where evil experiments had taken place on human guinea pigs in order to preserve a 'true Aryan race'. Most poignant was the photographs - here the human toll of the atrocities committed was really brought home. Six

million Jews is not just a figure when you see the faces of real men, women and children, young and old, those who came with families and those who came alone. Even those with families were divided into those who could work and those who were destined for death. The whole atmosphere of the place, even in the silence, resonated with the spirits of those who had passed. Opportunities for reflection were built in to the experience where poems, stories and reflections were read and discussed at appropriate times and points in the tour. The LfA organisers did a magnificent job at ensuring that this was no ordinary visit with tourist cameras and snapshots for family albums -this was a personal journey where reactions varied from silent tears to shock and disbelief. No one can go to Auschwitz -Birkenau and not have a reaction to it.

The snow started to fall and everyone began to add extra layers of clothing to accommodate the weather. One could not help but think about all those inmates in their thin striped pyjamas working in the freezing winter conditions or standing for roll call for up to 20 hours as a punishment because there had been an attempt to escape this 'hell on earth'.

Then - back on the bus to go to Birkenau - sandwiches were unwrapped and food eaten to help stave off the cold. Again one could not help but compare this simple basic need for food with those of the inmates whose measly portions of food made it difficult to survive. Birkenau with its famous watchtower was where the Final Solution - the mass extermination of Jews in gas chambers - took place. The indomitability of the human spirit is beyond belief.

Finally, the day had come to an end, completed by a very moving service taken by Rabbi Barry Marcus, to provide an opportunity to reflect on what the experience had personally meant for them. Some were quietly weeping; others were unable to speak with the emotion aroused. Each person lit a candle as a reminder of the events that had occurred here. As the group returned to the coach, walking in the snow with the light slowly dimming, the railway track stood out with its trail of flickering candles - each light like a lost soul. Yet the spirit lives on - in the memories of the survivors who lived through these events, in the memories of relatives who lost loved ones and now in the minds of these students- these ambassadors- who would use what they know, think and feel to tell others of what they had learned. I was filled with a pride in the youth of today who were coming to terms with their own range of emotions from

anger, horror, grief and sadness yet with a determined resolve to 'do their bit' so that these horrors would not be forgotten or denied and to challenge racism and prejudice in the world. If the reactions and behaviour of these students are a good indicator of the youth of today we are leaving society in safe hands.

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