

Day Trip to Auschwitz–Birkenau

Zoe and I, accompanied by Mrs Walker, were lucky enough to be given the opportunity by the Holocaust Educational Trust, to go on a day trip to Poland to visit the notorious concentration camp: Auschwitz–Birkenau. Before the visit we attended an orientation seminar where we learned about pre-war Jewish life and the background behind the Holocaust; we also had the honour of a firsthand personal account from a survivor of Auschwitz–Birkenau who gave us invaluable insight into the conditions of the camp, the day to day struggle to survive and the prisoner's state of mind.

On Tuesday the 23rd April; after leaving the house at the unearthly hour of 4:00am we met the other 200 students from other schools & members of the Holocaust Educational trust at Birmingham airport for our flight to Poland.

Auschwitz–Birkenau was a collaboration of camps; the initial Auschwitz served as a work camp for political prisoners. However after Hitler's 'final solution', a camp 3km away was built solely for the purpose of killing innocent people, it was the largest death camp ever made and facilitated the mechanistic & evil act of murdering 1.2million people; this was situated beside a forest of birch trees which is where it gets its name: "Birkenau" is the polish word for "birch trees". Birkenau itself was silent; it is true that no birds sing there and there is little that remains of the camp because the Nazi's, before leaving, attempted to burn everything down in order to hide the evidence of the atrocities which had occurred. However they did not succeed in burning everything and the rooms full of human hair and spectacles were horrific and unforgettable.

Our visit to Birkenau was something altogether different. It was still moving, but not in what you could see, like in Auschwitz I, but what you couldn't see. We were taken up the tower, a narrow staircase, and on the first floor, you could see the whole camp. What is now a few rebuilt wooden barracks on one side and lots of brick chimneys is mirrored on the other side with the original brick barracks that housed the women. It was never ending, and as we looked out, you saw the extent of the inhumanity that happened here. You cannot see the end of the rails, the run into the distance towards the forest. It is the same from the watchtower. After having a talk at the top from what we could, or couldn't see, we walk back down the same staircase and head through the main gate. After walking for a short distance, we stop and look round, taking the same look round as millions of others have before us. It is eerily quiet, bar the footsteps on the gravel as people walk round. You get the feeling that you are being observed from the watchtower, which now looms over us. It is not a pleasant feeling. We walk towards the men's barracks. They are not the original; they were burnt by the Germans before fleeing the camp.

Auschwitz–Birkenau was one of the most sobering and powerful experiences we will ever have; it truly opened our eyes to see behind the statistics and realize that everyone involved: the prisoners, victims and guards, were each an individual, with a unique life. It should remind us all to make sure that history does not repeat

itself – a recurring theme throughout the visit was “The one that does not learn history, is bound to live through it again.” (George Santayana).







