

“WHERE NO BIRDS FLY AND ELECTRIC SHOCKS” - AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU DEATH CAMPS.

The presence of birds flying, nesting, eating or singing are a true testament to life. The eagle soaring and gliding is a beauty to behold.

There are no signs of life in Auschwitz Birkenau. All life has been cheaply, deliberately, mathematically and violently extinguished; there are no birds to usher in the dawn; there are no birds to mark the setting sun. There is not the beauty of the eagle; only the tarnished effigy of the Third Reich eagle.

Close to the electric fences that so cruelly penned over 1.3 million prisoners, nests and birds can be seen on the public side only. It is as though the birds can feel a blanket "no fly" zone over the 400 acre site of Auschwitz and Birkenau. The site serves as the world's largest crematoria. Over 1.1 million people were murdered; most of these poor people were Jews but not all, as I discovered.

What do we know about Auschwitz-Birkenau? Very little; I suspect. I knew very little before visiting the huge, largely preserved museum on 19th January 2017. Before this, I was probably too frightened or ambivalent to understand the true nature of what happened there between 1942-1945.

Like the curious cat, my daughter, Ellie and I visited the Unesco World Heritage site on Thursday, 19th January 2017, just a few days before the anniversary of the liberation, by the Soviet army on 27th January 1945, 72 years ago. The site is just over a 1 hour drive from the Polish city of Kraków. The temperature was -7°C degrees. This in itself gives an interesting, empathetic, insight into what it must have been like; wearing just a thin pair of striped blue and white pyjamas. The prisoners would have been freezing to death.

Nothing prepares you for the horror that unfolds during the guided trip. It is not just the gratuitous murder that took place, but also the gruesome tortures reminiscent of the medieval age. What follows is a factual account of what I saw, read and heard from guides and other on-site sources. I hope this creates an attitude of what I felt. Those feelings vacillated from fear, anger, sympathy, incredulity and de-sensitisation. I will also try to broadly rationalise why many hitherto, decent, Nazi officers resorted to such brutal behaviour.

The "medical" experiments that took place added nothing to science or its literature. Dr Mengele one of the camp's so called medical personnel, had a morbid fascination with experimentation on twins. This served only to satisfy some unrequited fetish or fantasy. He was also infatuated with eugenic study; how to design the perfect Aryan. He wanted all German women to have twins, in order to grow the 1000 year Reich quicker.

Most of my life is bound by objectives. This trip was no different. My objectives were

three fold, to see:-

1. What actually happened at Auschwitz Birkenau?
2. How did it happen?
3. Why did the soldiers, whom were probably decent folk before the war, inflict one of the worse acts of genocide seen in human history?

What also unfolded very clearly, was the fact the allies knew full well what was going on from 1943. Why wasn't action taken.? That is one of the biggest unanswered questions.

Auschwitz is not its real name. It was given this name by the Germans. Similarly, the much larger Birkenau site was renamed by the Nazis. This renaming was part of a huge deception by the Nazis. Some of the deception is well known; some was a more secretive ploy to make the operation look normal, with the ultimate goal of preventing panic, so the murders could be clinically orchestrated, without hindrance.

Auschwitz was originally used as a barracks for the Polish National Army. Later, during the second world war it was used to detain political Polish prisoners. Auschwitz only became infamous as part of the Reich's "Final Solution" that is, the total annihilation of the Jewish race. Like all successes, the Nazi's wanted to step up production to accelerate the goal for their Fuhrer. (Hitler never visited the site) For that reason, they chose the area now known as Birkenau. This is a short, two-minute drive from the Auschwitz site also known as Auschwitz 2.

Unlike Auschwitz, where "selection" was employed to see whom would live or die; what I found striking at Birkenau was a 400 acre site devoted to mass murder on a huge industrial scale. Birkenau housed four, purpose built, gas chambers capable of murdering 2000 souls in each chamber. In order to preserve secrecy, the Nazis created a 40 mile radius "no go area" around Auschwitz and Birkenau. Just before liberation, the Nazis attempted to destroy the gas chambers. The rubble has not been disturbed and serves as a permanent memorial to the people whom were murdered there.

The mass killings were carried out using a chemical called ZYKLON "B" (Hydrogen cyanide) It was invented by a Jewish man as a pesticide in 1922. Research scientists charged with making the killing machine more efficient, soon saw the benefits of this chemical. This was the net result:- a human weighing 68 kilograms (150 lb) death occurs within two minutes of inhaling 70 mg of hydrogen cyanide. The owner of the company was later executed for selling this product to the SS.

On the subject of companies, several well know, household, world leading "brands" were complicit helping the Nazis. Siemens, Volkswagen and Hugo Boss were three of them. One of the most disturbing relics was tons of shaven hair harvested from the victims. The hair was utilised to make carpets, other weaves and Nazi uniforms. The principle designer and architect of the uniforms was Hugo Boss. There has been various lawsuits filed against some of these companies. In 1999, Hugo Boss agreed to contribute to a fund that employed forced labourers. One can only assume the

consequences of these firms and others not complying with the requests or orders of the Reich.

Our guide, Anna, was a second world war history graduate, with a speciality in the Holocaust. The meaning of the word Holocaust derives from the Greek word *Holokauston*, from *holos* 'whole' + *kaustos* 'burnt'. Albeit she was a seasoned guide, I thought at one stage she was going to cry.

Anna guided us through strict security and then through a labyrinth of "houses" used as accommodation for victims and the special prisoners known as "*Sonderkommandos*". These people were charged with incinerating the bodies and moving the dead corpses. At the height of the Hungarian Jewish murders in 1944, some 900 *Sonderkommandos* were employed. All of them eventually met their fate in the gas chambers. All the accommodation was built by forced labour. The houses and the interiors are remarkably well preserved as are the exhibits.

For me the most upsetting and heart wrenching sites were the mountains of property stolen from victims. This ranged from spectacles, suitcases, cosmetics and of course the human hair. The sorting area for victim property was called "Canada"; so named by victims because Canada was seen as utopian luxury. This part of the camp was not as sub-human as others.

Still, standing in the actual gas chamber at Auschwitz was a macabre and surreal experience. The atmosphere in the chamber really drove home the finality of what the Nazis were trying to achieve. Additionally, the deceptive shower camouflage would have put the victims at ease. I have to say I was very pleased to leave this exhibit.

The victims came from a huge cross section of Europe. The largest group were 500 000 Hungarians. The smallest representation was from Scotland. Jane Haining was a Scottish school teacher working in Budapest. She refused to leave her charges and subsequently died in Auschwitz. There is some speculation that a film is to be made about her life.

The first part of the visit took around 2 hours. After a short break, we were driven to Auschwitz 2 known as Birkenau. The scale of the final solution became overwhelmingly apparent. Simply put, Birkenau is ten times the size of Auschwitz; designed as a killing machine. After half an hour of this element, I was feeling desensitised to the exhibits, surroundings and what actually happened. I can well imagine that both the SS, prisoners and guards after a much longer time in this 'Hades on earth' were desensitised too.

The gas chambers and crematoria were at the far end of Birkenau; cleverly designed to conceal what was actually going on. Strangely, the commandant, Rudolph Hoss, had his house very close to this part of the operation. His wife and indeed children must have known what was going on. Standing next to Hoss' house is a single gallows used to execute Hoss' life following the Nuremberg War Trials.

What followed was the most disturbing feature of the entire trip. We heard some beautiful song coming from a group in front of us, near a stone memorial. This group

were traditional, orthodox Jewish men. As we approached there was a human guard around one individual. It became obvious that this gentleman was a holocaust survivor.

We walked back to the evil, iconic entrance to Birkenau. The tour had ended, or so I thought. Anna revealed her relatives had been annihilated in the camp. This probably underlines why she was such a good and passionate guide.

I will never return to Auschwitz Birkenau. This is a lesson from history that has huge implications for contemporary humankind and my personal values. Often after a public enquiry, the subjects often say words along the lines "we have taken steps so this will never happen again". Sadly, the holocaust memory does not follow this statement.

Joseph Stalin's Red Army liberated Auschwitz Birkenau. Ironically, his personal record of genocide record far exceeds the number of victims at Auschwitz Birkenau. Russian Jews continued to be persecuted post second world war under his regime.

Pol Pot murdered millions in Cambodia's Killing Fields. Millions died in 1971 under the Bangladesh government. Finally, in "civilised" Europe between 1992-1995. 40 000 Bosnians died. I have no doubt the scale of killing will continue. ISIS/ISIL are currently on the bottom rung on the genocidal ladder.

There were over 5000 SS troops employed at Auschwitz Birkenau at its height. Less than 2% were ever prosecuted for war crimes. So, my final comments are to understand, rationalise and not condone, why these troops resorted to this neo-extreme behaviour.

Transcripts from the Nuremburg trials reveal that many war criminals stated they were only obeying orders; but what orders? How are humans motivated to commit such acts.

In 1961 some 16 years after the war; Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist and PhD graduate conducted a fascinating experiment. He looked at the tenets of obedience to authority. The experiment was highly controversial, unethical and would not be allowed today by either the British or American Psychological Societies.

Milgram was Jewish and some of his relatives had survived the Holocaust. Several relatives bore the grotesque tattooed camp numbers. This is the substance of his experiment:-

In Milgram's basic paradigm, a subject walks into a laboratory believing that s/he is about to take part in a study of memory and learning. After being assigned the role of a teacher, the subject is asked to teach word associations to a fellow subject (who in reality is a collaborator of the experimenter).

The teaching method, however, is unconventional—administering increasingly higher electric shocks to the learner. Once the presumed shock level reaches a certain point, the subject is thrown into a conflict.

On the one hand, the strapped learner demands to be set free, he appears to suffer pain, and going all the way may pose a risk to his health. On the other hand, the experimenter, if asked, insists that the experiment is not as unhealthy as it appears to be, and that the teacher must go on.

In sharp contrast to the expectations of professionals and laymen alike, some 65% of all subjects continue to administer shocks up to the very highest levels. The reality was the “learner” was in fact an actor and not hooked up to a generator at all.

This goes a long way to explaining, not condoning, the behaviour of the SS at Auschwitz Birkenau. They were prepared to do whatever it took to obey the “person in authority” in their case either their boss or the Nazi high command. In Milgram’s case a man in a lab coat.

Similar experiments have since been carried out on the same lines as Milgram. All with the same results; that is to inflict pain or worse on humans without a thought of the consequences.

Auschwitz Birkenau was shocking; Milgram’s experiments were shocking. I have no doubt we will continue to be shocked, unabated, by humankind.

Steve Gaskin

A citizen of the world

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