

‘Arbeit macht frei’: work sets you free; a phrase that haunts me to this day, the short slogan of the Nazi murderers, inscribed into the front gates at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The first time I visited Auschwitz was one of the most powerful experiences I have ever had. I can still hear the young Polish tour guide say, “Over one million people died here.”

There is nothing quite like the chilling silence of a coach full of teenagers when it pulls into the car park at Auschwitz. I looked out the window, students, families, retirees. Polish, Israelites, Germans. My gaze was then drawn to the rows and rows of fences, topped with barbed wire. It was as if we had arrived at a chicken farm. We stepped off the bus and walked down the slowly winding path towards the entrance. The ground felt chalky and dry. On either side silver birches each cast their own cold, dark, shade. As I looked around me I thought about where I was standing. I struggled to fathom what had happened here. I looked over to my friend who I knew was having the same harrowing thoughts. As we walked further into this garden of death I reflected that I was stepping in the footsteps of the murdered Jews.

We were shown a doorway to the left of the path. It led into a large soulless building it looked the kind that would store grain or food. There were dozens, each identical. In we went. It was a darkly lit room of small proportions; I could feel my lungs work harder to draw in oxygen. The others entered with the same disgust painted on their faces. On the floor lay hay. I considered this might have been the camp’s stables. Yes, that’s right Surely?

“This room would have been home for fifty people.”

The short statement resonates. My heart sank in my chest as I realized my mistake. I never really quite accepted the truth. It was simply incomprehensible that this room could have possibly had that many people living in it. And in a way, I had been right, this was a stable. Because in the guard’s delusions the inmates were animals, and so they sought to treat them as such. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind as the truth unfurled. My hands were stone cold and my mouth was dry. I had to step outside.

It was then that I noticed.

Birdsong.

The whole time we had been outside, there had been complete silence. Not once had I heard the familiar sound of birdsong. It seemed even the birds knew this place’s grizzly truth. Uneasily, I continued with the tour. At the end of the path there was a brick entrance built into the side of a mound. On the mound there were no flowers, only the dull, yellow tinged grass that I had seen elsewhere in the camp. Walking through the entrance, I was not immediately aware what room I was standing in. Again my mind raced to find the answer. And then I saw the scratches on the wall. Everywhere. The haunting marks left by victims of the gas chamber.

I looked over to my teacher. He was crying. A man who I did not expect would show such emotions outwardly. But he had no choice. The gas chamber was emotionally disarming; however unyielding you believe yourself to be, there is nothing in the world that prepares you for standing in a room where thousands had died. Once again the urge to

leave took over, yet I couldn't. A morbid fascination anchored me to the ground. I was now shivering. The room was enveloped in an icy cold aura, as if death had taken it as its own. A thick metal door swung open as the tour guide gestured us through. A row of furnaces lined the wall. I now felt sick and my body weak. It was hard not to have a physical reaction when this sight is presented to you. The first thoughts are of family and friends substituted into the position of the victims. And however strong the mental constitution, those are difficult images to shake.

That afternoon we visited the second part of the camp. The first thing most people comment about Auschwitz-Birkenau is the size. The sheer scale is innumerable with row upon row of wooden huts, in the centre a train line, spanning around two hundred metres from the gateway all the way down to the small copse at the other end. A railway car still stands there in solitude to show visitors how the victims arrived. We walked parallel to the train track to the memorial that stood next to the ruins of the two main gas chambers and crematoriums. Destroyed by the cowardly guards as they escaped the advancing Soviet army. But gone was not the imperishable stench of death.

On this site of extreme evil were hundreds of sweet smelling flowers laid out next to a plaque on which were carved the words: "For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazi's murdered about one and a half million men, women and children mainly Jews from various countries of Europe. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940-1945."

I began the long walk back, allowing myself a quiet moment of thought. As I once again passed under the entrance, the silence was shattered...

Birdsong.

Alex Pagendam

