

Shadows and Silence – Visiting Auschwitz

"We come to see, but we never come to know..."

(K. Friedman)

History is only history until it gets personal. I knew when we boarded the train to Auschwitz that this was not going to be a fun excursion, but nothing quite prepares you for the place, however many times you've seen *Schindler's List* or written projects about the *Nazizeit*. Knowing that this was the place where my Austrian Jewish great-grandmother had died while her husband met the same fate in a different camp could only make the impact that much greater; it gave the visit the magnitude of a personal pilgrimage, something I needed to do for myself and for my grandmother, who had been sent safely to England only to see her parents trapped in Europe by the outbreak of war.

The town of Oswiecim itself is a small, fairly typical Polish settlement, a nice enough place if it wasn't for the camp just outside, which made the Germanised version of its name symbolic throughout Europe of all the worst terrors of the Holocaust. In fact there were two camps here, a work camp and the concentration unit; the former has been left pretty much untouched, while the latter now houses a visitor centre and a range of exhibitions in the restored buildings. A regular bus takes you to the site along a route which must mirror that taken by the original inmates – a short trip through quiet countryside, culminating at the bitterly familiar gate with its ironic legend '*Arbeit Macht Frei*'. This entrance, and the death camp itself, seem at first sight to be far smaller than one would imagine given the sheer numbers of people 'processed' in its lifetime. Only once you get inside some of the barracks and see the displays detailing the crowded conditions, the dehumanisation, does the enormity of it start to sink in. Every human touch becomes suddenly poignant: the naive letters home and the despairing graffiti contrast starkly with the grim efficiency of a place where the gas chambers were fitted with shower heads to keep the victims unsuspecting until it was too late. Even this cannot compare with the realisation of scale given by a sixty-foot case containing nothing but an endless mountain of human hair, punctuated by recognisable pigtails and curls – a limited display only, as grotesque Nazi logic ensured that much of it was used to make fabrics to support the German war effort. Normal life and humanity seems very far away.

If the first site seems small, the second is anything but, and makes a bigger impact despite being little more than a collection of ruins. The location is vast, with fences, wire and rail tracks stretching out in all

directions; the jagged remains of buildings dynamited by the retreating SS loom amid the rubble and signs label the indistinguishable compounds as segregated areas for the various groups of 'antisocials' who ended up here, from Jews and gypsies to homosexuals and the workshy. More sinister, however, is the pleasantness of the spot, now grass-covered with trees in full leaf giving shade from a summer sun and a slight breeze – where the execution site brings home the inhumanity of its function, the work camp emphasises that it was after all people who constructed it and people who ran it, enjoying the same sunshine while their prisoners were slowly worked to death. Only the silence marks it out as different from any other series of fields; the inexplicable lack of noise from planes, traffic or even birdsong creates an atmosphere that cannot be described in any rational terms. Even in ruins this is not a place to take lightly.

No one takes photos in Auschwitz. The groups of tourists are kept small and wander round in a hushed, respectful daze, trying to grasp everything that happened here by seeing it for themselves. Old women shuffle through the corridors looking at the thousands of official mug shots that line every wall, all too obviously looking for a name or face from the painful past; I found myself doing the same, hoping to find something but at the same time not wanting to, even though it could only confirm what I already knew. Nothing I can remember has been as exhausting or as thought-provoking – a visit here is not a cultural event, a learning experience or an edifying gesture of personal improvement, it is a confrontation with everything that mankind has supposedly left behind, an emotional shock treatment that destroys the affected detachment and indifference of the modern world. We left as we had arrived, in silence, subdued by our minds' weak attempts to assimilate the sheer reality of a living past that had once seemed so far away. History was suddenly uncomfortably close, and after Auschwitz it could never really be put aside again.

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