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Auschwitz and Commemoration

I visited Krakow in January 2017; it was bitterly cold and the snow was about four inches thick in the lesser-trodden areas of the city. Generally, it was absolutely stunning. At the time of my trip, I had just finished a module that focussed on the Great War and memory, and so I really wanted to visit Krakow in order to consider the concept of *commemoration*: I wanted to see how, and if, the city commemorates the horrific events that occurred there in the 1930s and 40s.

Walking through the city centre, it was surprisingly easy to not think about the Holocaust. I did not find any memorials or commemorative statues, plaques, gardens, etc. Perhaps plaques were buried in the snow, or maybe gardens were dead with it being winter... It's not that I was searching for such things, and so at the time I was not shocked at the lack of memorials; but reflecting upon my trip and walking through Manchester and Liverpool city centres and finding cenotaphs, plaques, etc dedicated to the memory of the servicemen and women from the cities, I am now reflexively shocked at the lack of such things in Krakow city centre, when the countless murders that occurred in the city were exactly that: *murder*; whereas commemoration in the UK is for voluntary sacrifice. Should victims not be commemorated too?

It was not until the third day of my trip that I was made consciously aware of Krakow's dark history, when I participated in a walking tour of the city. I visited what used to be the ghetto, which was about forty-five minutes away from the centre, and found the first memorial: an artistic monument made of large empty chairs, commemorating the liquidation of the ghetto and the luggage left behind by the Jews. Somebody had left a single rose on one of the chairs, and others had left pebbles. It was incredibly moving and the emotion made me slightly wary of the tour of Auschwitz I would be doing the following day. How does one literally walk in the footsteps of so many innocent victims and not be entirely overwhelmed?

Reflecting upon the tour of the concentration camp, I am completely shocked to realise that my unconscious way of avoiding the reality of the situation was to search for beauty. At the time, I was not aware that I was looking for something beautiful amongst the brick buildings that once were used as severely overcrowded "housing", experimentation laboratories, torture rooms, execution walls, and gas chambers. The suffocating reality that countless people died right where I was standing was so overwhelming that, looking back, I now realise I escaped it by desperately looking for beauty. Mostly, the snow provided this, but, right next to the brick building once used as a fake courtroom (disturbingly used in order to provide a false sense of hope that one might survive and not be executed) there was a bright yellow flower poking out of the snow. I remember that it held my attention for some time before I entered the building. It would be regarded as a weed and pulled out of your back garden, but right there, in Auschwitz, it looked like the most beautiful thing in the world. Looking back, I also realise the haunting silence – no birds sang.

The atmosphere at Auschwitz-Birkenau was very similar, except that the desolation forced me to fully accept the reality of the situation. Standing at the end of the railway track and looking out across what once were endless rows of wooden huts, one simply cannot find any way to escape the emotion that comes with realising the almost incomprehensible number of people either immediately sent to their deaths right where you are standing, or forced to live their indeterminate futures in such horrific circumstances in buildings that seem to go on forever to your left and to your right.

The only way of attempting to reach any element of catharsis at Birkenau came in a huge stone monument erected between the ruins of Krema II and Krema III, the two largest gas chambers in the camp. The commemorative piece, and its many plaques reading the same message in different languages, was a welcome space for grieving and remembering. The harsh message of the plaques, 'for ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity...' at first forced me to feel incredibly bitter and hateful of the Nazis, rather than to grieve for the millions of innocent people murdered at Birkenau; however, I then realised that the catharsis came in recognising both the utter tragedy of the Holocaust, and that the opening of the concentration camps as museums works to forever remind people of what must never happen again.

Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau do not commemorate in the traditional sense; they do not lovingly remember the deaths of the millions of people, mainly Jews, at the hands of the Nazis. However, they do commemorate those innocent people by demonstrating the horrific reality of their suffering, and the museums serve to educate visitors so that the reality of the Holocaust can never be repeated.