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BA Hons History

Educational visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau

In April 2017 I was given the opportunity, by the Centre of Jewish Studies, to visit both Auschwitz and Birkenau in Krakow, Poland. Not only am I incredibly thankful to the department for my travel award, but I also feel indebted to my tour guide for making a horror of the past so relevant to today.

As a race, we must ensure that the environment in which genocide can take place is never created or allowed to occur again. In relation to the modern day, whereby xenophobia is on the rise, it is important to remember what such feelings of hate can evolve into. One only has to look at the escalation of anti-Semitic feelings into the merciless slaughter of many. For example, out of 1.3 million people deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1.1 million were killed. This atrocity, that man bestowed on fellow man, is not something that should be forgotten. The Holocaust cannot be labelled as a thing of the past and excused- we must remember that this happened only 70 years ago. These death camps were created and run by ordinary people. A lot of high-ranking SS officers were simply farmers. These horrors were not the works of geniuses with special skills- they were just like you and me.

For me, going to the concentration camp brought to life all that I have studied from primary school. I was able to learn about the individual identities that were persecuted in the Holocaust and not just the textbook figure of "six million." My trip taught me that Jews and Judaism were not the only targets of Hitler. 25,000 gypsies of Roma fell victim to Hitler's dream of 'Lebensraum.' Alongside Jews, prisoners of war, Jehovah's Witnesses, Priests, Pastors, homosexuals, the disabled, resisters in general and many more were sent to their death at concentration camps. On spending a couple of minutes in silence in front of the memorial at Birkenau, I saw a map which listed the nationalities of the victims. On seeing the sheer list of countries affected by just one concentration camp, I was highly surprised, especially on realising that English prisoners of war had died here too. It was at this point that I realised that the Holocaust was not something defined to a group of people or to one area, but to humanity.

To conclude, I would like to refer to a quote that I saw on the wall of Oskar Schindler's factory: 'He who saves one life saves the world.' These eight words have stuck with me because even during periods of Nazi occupation, human kindness and love prevailed in the simplest of ways. People would risk their lives to try and give prisoners extra food or hide Jews and even employ those victimized- even though they knew that if they were caught, they would have the same fate as those that they were trying to aid. In a time of unimaginable fear and evil, humans resisted and it begs the question, if all these people had

risen up together against the Nazis, could these concentration camps have been stopped? Perhaps the six million victims of the Holocaust could have been spared. I believe that everyone should visit a concentration camp to remember the many innocent lives that were lost and to realise the responsibility that we all have to prevent and to educate.