

A Familiar Silence: The Genocidal Landscapes of Auschwitz and Rwanda

After having visited several of Rwanda's sites of genocide during a research trip earlier this year, I was then given the opportunity to visit the world's most harrowing site of genocide: Auschwitz-Birkenau. Situated just an hour and a half outside of Krakow in Poland, this site of remembrance is easily accessible to the many visitors it receives on a daily basis. It was a beautiful sunny Monday afternoon in late May when I visited, and the grass had started to push its way through the harsh earth. Contrary to what I had read and heard of Auschwitz, it was almost as if the horror of its history was hidden in the rays of sunlight reflecting off of the main tower of Auschwitz II: Birkenau, through which the trains would arrive, carrying prisoners from all over Europe. In contrast, Rwanda's Murambi Technical College, with its classrooms never having achieved their intended use, became instead an accidental site of the killing of thousands of Rwandans in 1994. Its classrooms now linger behind the back of the main building and in the shadow of a majestic East African mountain. It is the most harrowing of the three sites we visited, openly displaying the embalmed corpses of victims of all ages within the classrooms. Auschwitz, however, was no coincidental killing site.

My first observation of Auschwitz was the overtly symmetrical, almost disciplined structuring of buildings, from its administrative blocks to its prison barracks. The scale of disciplined architecture I encountered echoed a banality of evil that Hannah Arendt once wrote ferociously of. The geographical area of Birkenau, used solely for extermination, spans hundreds of kilometres, and imprisoned millions of men, women and children, unwittingly awaiting death.

Another observation was that of the distance between these landscapes and the nearest interaction with civilisation. Unlike Murambi, which finds itself tightly nestled within a small village; Auschwitz is hidden away from its local town. This was to be a contributing factor to this banality of evil, in which the townspeople were never to be aware of the acts of genocide being carried out right on their doorsteps. The camp's geographical isolation sits in stark contrast to the thousands that now pass through its gates and despite this; I have never experienced such a void of life. It is a testimony, however, to the preservation of memory in which its caretakers continue to humbly and professionally guide their guests through its history and reality.

The genocidal landscapes of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Murambi Technical College, both preserving realities of horror within a familiar uniformed silence, stand on their own as sites of global responsibility to the continued work of conflict resolution. Both highlight the

reality of violence and hatred as an everyday evil: one that can be meticulously planned as well as suddenly provoked. The preservation of such sites invites a conversation on the prevention of further atrocities in a modern socio-political climate that is threatened by the emergence of similar regimes and informs on a proactive approach to peacebuilding.