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Educational visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau

In Spring 2018, I was given the opportunity to visit Auschwitz and Birkenau in Krakow, Poland. For this I would like to thank the late Fanni Bogdanow, without whom I would not of been able to take part on this thought-provoking trip.

Throughout my educational career, from GCSE History through to my current Religious Studies degree, Auschwitz has been a recurring symbol of the suffering and devastation inflicted by the Nazi regime. As a result, figures such as 6 million and dates like 20th May 1940 become so hard-wired as cold, hard facts that they almost become rigid and impersonal. It is easy to become desensitised to the reality they represent, of the number of innocent people killed and the introduction of one of the most efficient killing systems known to man. It is for this reason that I felt this opportunity would be so beneficial to me, both for my studies and for myself on a more personal level. As my tour guide so fervently repeated: It is important to remember the past, lest we repeat it in the future.

One thing that struck me about my visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau is how real the events which had took place so many years ago became as I stood in the exact bunkers in which these victims had slept. How profound the idea was that I was standing at the exact window at the shooting wall where people had stood and watched their loved ones be executed. One story that really resonated with me was one of a Jewish boy who had been selected to burn the bodies of those who had been sent to the gas chamber at Birkenau. He saw the body of his mother and was so overcome with grief that he climbed into the furnace with her. According to my tour guide, this kind of story was not uncommon within the grounds of Birkenau.

Auschwitz commemorated the deaths of Holocaust victims, but I feel it is important that we do not forget to celebrate their lives. Returning from the isolated grounds on which Auschwitz and Birkenau stood to the bustling city centre of Krakow, I felt my visit would not be complete without a visit to the city's Jewish Quarter, Kazimierz. This area was bustling with people, and I headed for the Old Jewish Synagogue which now operates as a museum.

Although devastated during the German invasion during World War II, the exhibitions at the Old Jewish Synagogue reflect a different side to Judaism than that shown at Auschwitz. While Auschwitz displayed hair, glasses and children's belongings which had been confiscated from inmates upon entry, the walls of the Jewish synagogue spoke of Jewish tradition and important figures within the history of Poland's Jewry. This helped me to take away the idea that although what happened at Auschwitz and all other concentration camps should not be forgotten, it should be remembered alongside the vibrant cultures that existed across the world in which the victims of the Holocaust thrived. It is important that we remember them as people, not just victims.