

Intro:

Hello everyone, My name is Joshika, and my name is Lucia, and as this year's Holocaust Ambassadors, we wanted to talk to you about our experience. Back in March, we had the privilege to visit the Memorial and Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. Reflecting on this opportunity, we would like to share with you what we have learned, so you can go on to share with others what is undoubtedly an integral part of our human history that we should never forget.

What was the visit?

Although we were only in Poland for one day, we covered a vast amount of history. From the rich history of pre-war Jewish life to the informative yet tragic history of Auschwitz and Birkenau, this visit was transformative and impactful.

Pre-war Jewish life:

Once we landed in Poland, our first stop was the town of Oświęcim, which the Nazis renamed to its more commonly known name, Auschwitz. This is a small yet significant example of the eradication of Jewish culture. Here, we learned an immense amount about pre-war Jewish life. Although currently there are no Jewish citizens living in Oświęcim, prior to 1939, the town had a bustling and vibrant atmosphere, with 58% of the town's population being Jews!

The inhabitants of this town were all rounded up in the market square (Rynek) and were either forced to relocate or were sent to Auschwitz. Before that, the town of Oświęcim was a lively and vibrant place to live, with many theatre performances, balls, celebrations for each religion that was respected by the other, and large markets. With such a joyful and exciting atmosphere now extinguished by the Nazis into pindrop silence, it serves as a reminder of the long-term effects of unchecked power, both socially and economically. Oświęcim is now struggling financially due to the stigma of the war, while also losing their entire Jewish population, as after the war only a few decided to return. Even now, what the Nazis did 80 years ago is affecting lives today, and it must encourage us to reflect on the long-term effects of conflicts today.

As we mentioned, this town was very Jewish-centric, and as a result, many businesses were Jewish-owned. One example of this is Jakob Habefeld, who owned a successful vodka company, one of the oldest in Poland. This just goes to show how integrated the Jews were before the war.

The relationship between Rabbi Bombach and Father Skarbek, as well as the photo of the two best friends, struck a chord within me, as when many people think of pre-war Jewish life, they think of anti-Semitism everywhere from everyone, which while may be true, learning about pre-war Jewish life can highlight how in some towns and some areas, anti-Semitism was not prevalent and Jews and Christians coexisted in harmony. An example specific to Oświęcim is the Herz Hotel, which both Jews and Christians visited.

AUSCHWITZ 1

Arbreit Macht Frei: May work set you free. This sign effectively recapitulates the horrendous conditions of this camp. Originally set up as a concentration camp rather than an extermination camp, it was a place for political prisoners, Roma and Sinti, and then Jews to be subjected to hard labour in return for their lives.

However, in 1942, it was later turned into an extermination camp with a prevalent use of gas chambers.

With over 1.1 million Jews and countless more Roma, Sinti, and disabled lives claimed in these camps, what this project has taught us is the importance of humanising the Jews—to understand the Holocaust as so much more than a mere statistic, but for each life to truly be understood. All these shoes, all these bags, and all these utensils belonged to people who were just like us—normal, ordinary people—and we owe it to them to do whatever we can to not diminish them into one number. They were all lives abruptly cut short.

One of these lives that profoundly impacted me was the sacrifice of St. Maxymilian Maria Kolbe.

Following the escape of a prisoner at Auschwitz, 10 men were randomly selected to be executed here at the execution square. One of these men was Franciszek Gajowniczek, who was married with young children. Prior to being executed, he shouted for help, begging the Nazis not to execute him due to his family. Being incredibly selfless and brave, Saint Kolbe volunteered himself to be executed instead, suffering through weeks of starvation and torture.

This enormous sacrifice showcased beyond doubt that the Jews refused to be treated as victims. Up until their last moments, they never believed that this was their end; even in the bleakest of times, they retained their humanity. In the moments before death, most continued to be beautiful, genuine, kind-hearted souls, regardless of whether the Nazis stripped them of their identity. This is why I believe that it is vital to not regard the Jews as only victims of the Holocaust; they were all mentally survivors.

Auschwitz 2: Birkenau

Auschwitz II, also known as Birkenau, was built in 1941 after the previous inhabitants were expelled and their homes and everything they once knew was destroyed. While many who were sent here were instantly killed, others were forced to work in harsh and terrible conditions. The conditions were so terrible that the favoured job at the camp were those who were forced to clean out the toilets. While we now view that as one of the worst jobs possible, to the prisoners, it was their chance to escape as they were inside and rarely visited by the guards.

There were many acts of deceit in Birkenau, as it had to pass inspection under the Red Cross. Fake heating systems were built, and families were allowed to live together in the 'family camp'. This, however, was just to prove that not everyone who was sent to Auschwitz was killed. Additionally, the gas chambers were made to look very normal, and this is where the idea of prisoners believing they were taking a shower came from. The Sonderkommando, or prisoners who worked inside the gas chambers, would be encouraged to remind people to find their clothes and belongings afterwards. They witnessed hundreds of thousands of innocent people being inhumanely killed, so eventually they organised an uprising and managed to destroy one of the gas chambers. Furthermore, teeth from those killed and diary entries from those there were hidden in the ground to ensure that, after eventual liberation, others would be aware of the atrocities faced.

In 1947, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial was created to preserve the site and make sure it wasn't erased from history.

Mr. Steven Frank, BEM:

Following this trip, we had an incredible opportunity to hear from a Holocaust survivor about their experience, and I think the primary lesson I learnt from him is that it is truly when life casts its darkest shadows that the light of humanity shines its brightest.

Mr. Steven Frank was born in 1935. His father was a well-known Dutch lawyer who was born in Zwolle, the son of a doctor. His mother was the daughter of professional musicians who emigrated to Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century. He has an elder and a younger brother.

When the war broke out, while they had ample opportunity to emigrate, due to his father's work with Jewish mental hospitals, they decided to stay. In the end, it was his father's connections that saved them.

His father worked for the Jewish resistance, but unfortunately, in 1942, he was betrayed and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was gassed and killed. Simultaneously, Mr. Frank, his mother, and his siblings were arrested, but due to his father's connections, they were not sent to Auschwitz but instead to a castle at Barneveld, and then on to a camp in Czechoslovakia, where Steven survived conditions that are beyond imagination—a lack of sanitation, insufficient food, and regular deportations to the 'East'—a euphemism for murder.

It was there, where he was wandering as a child, that he was nearly killed by a guard's dog, a small child of 8 years old—while the guards simply stood there laughing.

After nearly losing all hope, he then met a man growing tomatoes. An ordinary plant that he didn't even like but continued growing. It was then that Steven regained some hope in humanity through seeing the man love and cherish his miniature garden—seeing life blossom amidst the death surrounding him. This man took Steven in and taught him everything he knew about growing tomatoes. Unfortunately, this man was killed in the camp, but to this day, Steven cherishes his legacy by maintaining his own garden and growing numerous tomatoes.

Out of over 15,000 children in the camp, less than 150 survived. Steven's story is one of destruction and every bit of ugly humanity has, but it is also one of hope and kindness, which in the end prevailed. These testimonies are important to understand the sheer determination of every single prisoner to survive, but to also not lose their humanity and their identity whilst doing it. Grouping 6 million into one statistic loses the individuality and identity of all these people, and this is why it is important to acknowledge and understand that the Holocaust is so much more than a mere statistic—even holding on to a few stories can leave a legacy known for kindness and courage rather than despair and cruelty.

Relevance now:

Why would you want to visit Auschwitz?

We had this question posed to us many times before, during, and after our visit, and it is an important one because what is the point of visiting a place 80 years later that has been turned into a memorial site. In spite of that, I believe that it still has a place of relevance in today's society, as what happened shouldn't ever be repeated. "Hearing is not like seeing" is another phrase we heard very often, and it is essential as we cannot fully grasp what happened, yet we can equip ourselves with as much knowledge as possible and use it for good.