

Our visit to . . . Auschwitz

Our school has been a part of the LFA project for a long time, and every year A-Level History students have the chance to apply to take an active role in the project. We decided to apply as we thought being a part of this project would be important in widening our knowledge of the Holocaust and allow us to take into consideration the views and opinions of others on why the Holocaust should be remembered. We believe that no one should be treated the way the victims of the Holocaust were, so therefore remembering the Holocaust is vital as it reminds us about the past and it ensures that something so tragic in history should not be repeated.

In order to be a part of the project, we gave a presentation on why we wanted to be a part of the project, why we should be picked and why it's important to remember the Holocaust. Getting selected was a great honour as it gave us the opportunity to visit one of the most overwhelming sites in history. The project consisted of a seminar, where groups from all over the country would prepare themselves to visit Auschwitz in Poland.

Taking such a direct part in this project provided us with the chance to pass on our experiences and thoughts to a younger generation to ensure the genocide of the past is not repeated in the future.

We personally think the seminar in Leeds was a most helpful and eye-opening experience. At the seminar we were taught about Jewish life before the mass genocide and about the Jewish population in Europe, and especially Poland. After this introduction a highlight for us came when we listened to a Holocaust survivor, Zigi Shipper. It was deeply moving knowing the number of Holocaust survivors is slowly dwindling. Listening to a survivor's testimony had great significance, as it reveals a personal experience that can be reiterated to future generations keeping the memories of the extent of the genocide alive when they have gone. It also reiterates to future generations the scale of the genocide when facts and figures fall short of the emotional impact each individual experienced.

Zigi, now aged 86, told us about his experience before the Holocaust started and after it ended. What we remember from his testimony is that from a young age he lived with his grandparents but soon it was just him and his grandmother. When he was taken to the concentration camp he was separated from his grandmother and he didn't know if she was still alive. Zigi was lucky enough to escape several times with his friends whilst he was being moved to different camps. He and his friends were eventually rescued by the British. The day after the liberation, Zigi's grandmother died. Whilst Zigi was in London after being rescued by the British he was reunited with his mother.

Listening to Zigi's testimony was the highlight of the project. This is because his story gave us a very personal insight into the Holocaust and how it affected people's lives. It also made the Holocaust seem that little more realistic. His story made us realise the extent of the Holocaust and how it affected normal people like you and me. After listening to his testimony we had an opportunity to ask questions. We found the question and answer session interesting because this is when Zigi told everyone, 'Do not hate, it will ruin your life'. We found it fascinating to hear this from a Holocaust survivor; telling younger generations not to hate. How could he not hate the Nazis after everything that they did to him and his people?

A week after the seminar we visited Poland. This was a one day visit. We had an early start checking into the airport at around 5.00am and boarding the flight at 7.00am. Once in Poland, we were allocated to our groups and on our way to the first camp we went through the city of Krakow. Our day consisted of visiting two camps, Auschwitz 1: the labour camp, and Auschwitz 2: the concentration camp.

Visiting the labour camp was an overwhelming experience. Converted into a museum it displayed the belongings people had brought with them. Many of the captives who arrived at the camp thought they were starting a new life and job and would soon be returning home, but instead all their possessions were taken control of and they endured suffering, pain, loss of family and hardship. We went to rooms displaying all the shoes and all the hair. In



that room fabric had been made from hair. When people arrived at the concentration camps their heads were shaved. Each individual who entered the camp had their identity taken away from them, they had no name; they were given only a number.

After visiting this terrible site we went to the main camp, Auschwitz 2: the death camp. This camp was different to the first; it was much bigger. It wasn't like the first camp. It wasn't a museum. It was the bare remains of the original camp. We were shown the gas chambers which seemed far too small to accommodate the hundreds of people who were cramped into them. We also saw where they stayed; each hut seemed small but hundreds were crowded together making them highly susceptible to disease.

'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it'

After we toured the camp, a Rabbi led a memorial service. Here, the Rabbi told us that we should always remember the Holocaust and its victims; forgetting the memory of those individuals would be disrespectful and inhumane. The Rabbi urged younger generations to keep the memory alive and to recognise the importance of the Holocaust in order to avoid major tragedies happening again.

At the end of the memorial service the Rabbi read out hymns in Hebrew to show respect to the victims of the Holocaust. After the memorial, we lit candles and placed them on the main train track and had a moment of silence to show our respect and com-

memoration to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. The day was coming to an end and the final thing we saw was the collection of photos the victims had brought with them. They were of ordinary people and of friends and families which left us thinking and reflecting poignantly on our experience.

Going to Auschwitz and being a part of this project was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Listening to Zigi's story and taking his experience with us to the concentration camps made us understand the Holocaust more clearly. Being in Auschwitz made us realise that this actually happened to millions of people, including Zigi. The visit to Poland wasn't as emotional as we expected it to be, but it was a lot to take in. Personally, after the visits to Leeds and Poland, we were more affected by the experience during the journey where we had time to reflect on our experiences and to think of ways that we would pass on the message to a younger generation to make them realise the significance of the genocide.

George Santayana, a philosopher said, 'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. This helped us realise the significance of our experience as we would be passing on the message of remembrance. As a result of our experience, we aim to pass on the message to younger generations as we believe that those who learn from the history of the Holocaust and survivors' testimonies are the ones who have the potential to make a difference on both a local and global level to avoid the repetition of genocide in the future.

Aishah Ashraf & Sadaf Nadeem

