



6,000,000

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Upon returning to school after half-term, many of us are subject to the incredibly open query of “how was your holiday?” Normally this is answered by a shrug of the shoulders and the concession of “yeah it was alright” or maybe even a grin and the launching into the story of a particular exploit. However, upon my return on that Monday morning I was impartial to either of these two categories. The reason being I had experienced a holiday that was not so much a holiday but more of an experience different to anything I had ever done before and I was unsure what to make of it. I had spent 5 days of my half term completing a journey around Poland with the youth group, Tribe. This meant that on Sunday I found myself stood in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp only to find myself on Monday morning sat in my school classroom.

When talking about the Holocaust, the number of 6 million is certain to be mentioned. Six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, murdered by the Nazis. It is difficult to fully comprehend the gravity of this number. As a result, the expanse of people who are included in that total are somewhat generalised into exactly that, a grand total. Here’s some perspective; the last recorded population count for London was 8.674 million. Imagine if 70% of those people just disappeared one day, never to be seen again. However, that image does not even begin to convey what occurred in the Holocaust, as what occurred in this genocide was not that the 6 million of Europe’s Jewry simply disappeared. They were systematically murdered in plain sight of the civilian population. On the second day of my trip I distinctly remember the moment as we were driving on a coach through a Polish suburb. Suddenly, in the midst of conversation, our tour guide spoke through the microphone, “Please all look to your right-hand-side. That is Majdanek.” Abruptly, the houses on the right came to a halt and there before us was, stretching as far as we could see, were lines of barbed wire fencing along with the rows of huts which make up the concentration camp. The camp seemed to be almost part of the Polish suburb with several houses effectively backing onto it. It



looked like something out of a movie and it was when contemplating that thought, standing gazing into a gas chamber that I realised just how unrealistic the Holocaust appears to many people, Jewish or not. It occurred over 70 years ago and the main way I've understood it is through films or facts in books. We understand that it happened but I'm unsure if we truly grasp what really occurred. Looking into that gas chamber caused me to realise that I had no prior understanding at all. I was there quite literally staring death in the face and in the exact place where Jewish families were brutally murdered through the use of Zyklon B gas canisters. I have always simply assumed that death would be caused relatively quickly in these chambers. This assumption was wholly incorrect. The correct figure is that of twenty long, horrific minutes. Looking at the scratch marks on the walls can instantly shatter any doubt of this number. These marks, made by peoples' fingers as they clawed at the walls in their pain, are the evidence of the agony the victims of the gas chambers were subject to before they finally died.

My visit to Majdanek was on the first full day of my trip. I would like to say that it was the worst place that I visited but I can't. We also visited Belzec, a death camp where Jews were taken for only one reason – to be killed. Here the camp has been completely destroyed and all that remains now is an incredibly powerful memorial to those that died. Down the middle of a hill of rubble that rose up above us was carved a flat path cutting through the mountain. This meant that as you walked down the path, the walls of the hill would rise up above you gradually. The effect being that you had a frightening sensation of entrapment as the walls began to tower over you. This effect is intended as it conveys the feeling the Jews had as they walked towards their deaths. There was no escape and no way of going back. However much one envisages it whilst walking down this path, it is certainly impossible to understand the feelings of the people at the time. One is able to gain only a partial idea of what might have been felt, making it easier to empathise than simply trying to gain this perception from a film.

Of the 6 million Jews murdered, 3 million were Polish citizens. Before the war, if you were to walk through the streets of Warsaw, every third person walking past you would be a Jew. Many were ordinary people who were not obviously Jewish and were greatly integrated within the non-Jewish population of the society. They had every day jobs ranging in significance and difficulty and were an important part of the thriving community of Warsaw. Upon walking through Warsaw and visiting the Warsaw ghetto, I received a clear depiction of the horrifying fact; the 1 in 3 Jews on the street pre-war had decreased to a probability of 0 out of 3. This probability was highlighted in my desperate search to prove the tour guide wrong. As we walked the streets my eyes flicked from face to face. It is a strange fact that Jews seem to be able to recognize other Jews, no matter how obviously religious, just by observing their characteristics (and not necessarily by the anti-Semitic stereotype of



the prominent nose). During the four hours we spent in Warsaw and the area of where the Warsaw ghetto was I failed to spot a single Jew. The guide was right – they were all gone.

Sunday, the last day of the trip, was spent in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Auschwitz One. Many people think that there is only one Auschwitz camp. In fact, there are three main camps at Auschwitz with 48 other sub-camps surrounding them. We began by visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau; the largest extermination camp run by Nazi Germany during the war. Accompanying us was a lady named Bobby. Bobby's family were killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau, whilst she survived in the camp and has lived on to tell her haunting story. Bobby is, without any doubt in my mind, the strongest person I have ever met in my entire life. Needless to say, her story is astounding and awe-inspiring but something equally impressive was stood right before me. This woman was returning to the very place where she was put through a living hell in order to tell a group of teenagers, who she has never met before, her life story. She returned to the exact spot where she last saw her parents disappear before her. The very place where she so narrowly escaped death. What is striking though is the manner in which she carries herself through the memories which come flooding back to her. It is with a smile that she recounted memories of her family and her witty sarcasm makes her instantly likeable, despite the gravity of the events she recounts. Possibly the most amazing experience of the whole trip was when, as a group, we were with Bobby as she sat '*shiva*'. Although this event usually occurs immediately after the death of a family member, Bobby sat *shiva* with us there. In the centre of Auschwitz we stood around her and one at a time approached her and tried to say something of condolence. Thinking of something to say was incredibly difficult but approaching a lady who has been through so much and saying these things to her are an even more perplexing task. Even the Rabbi, who accompanied us on the trip, had to pause for a moment during which time Bobby looked up at him and with a mischievous grin on her face as tears rolled down her cheeks asked, "How's my shiva going?"

Walking out of the infamous gates of Auschwitz One later that day was a journey many Jews would unfortunately never have experienced. Again, I was subject to the surreal nature of the setting as the rich reds and oranges of the autumn leaves somewhat glorified the picture before me. I had to remind myself that this is nothing more than an illusion of the death that envelops these camps and the whole of Poland. It is also the illusion of the sum of 6 million being the only noteworthy thing about the Holocaust to be remembered that needs to be swept aside. Having had my own opportunity to experience Poland, I would strongly advise visiting in order to gain your own experience of what occurred during the Holocaust. It is certainly not something that should just be forgotten and is furthermore a part of history that cannot be conveyed just through a textbook. Everyone is subject to a different experience and are emotionally affected at different times but one



fact is a certainty for all that go – it is a life-changing experience. On my part, I have gained a greater appreciation for life and all that is done for me as Poland led me to question how I would fare in the position of those who were part of the Holocaust, where everything that I take for granted each day was stolen from them. These ideals are not solely Jewish and hence highlight there is no necessity of a Jewish background to visit Poland. Anyone, of any faith or no faith, can truly take something away from it. After all, Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust. The sheer number of places that I visited is such that I have only been able to mention a few in what is already a rather long article. The mass graves of children, the abandoned synagogues, the crowded cemeteries and the several other death and concentration camps are all part of what was an incredibly intense trip. Although, this all may sound rather depressing and it may appear questionable why on earth you would want to go to such places where death is all you can see. The reason is that we, as human beings, have an obligation to remember even if those people are not connected to you is, at the end of the day, they were all human beings just like you and me. It is important to remember all 6 million but in order to get the most of such a trip, I would encourage following the story of one or two particular families (I was fortunate enough to meet several Holocaust survivors as well as non-Jews who assisted Jews in hiding). This focus gave the trip so much more meaning and therefore serves to increase the likelihood of a visitor taking a life-changing ideal away from Poland, the country where so many lives were lost.

I would like to especially thank several of the people who made the trip as meaningful and momentous as it was. Firstly, the various Rabbis, the Rebbetzin and youth workers who accompanied my group as well as the organisers within Tribe and of course the guides and organisers within JRoots.

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