

Your Visit to Auschwitz, March 1995

My talk falls into 3 parts:

1. History
2. Visiting Auschwitz
3. Understanding and Explaining

1. History

There were many concentration camps in Germany and Poland and other occupied countries. But only 6 death camps - all in Poland: Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, Majdanek, Chelmno.

Auschwitz was also, or rather, initially: a labour camp (as were many other concentration camps). Before the 6 camps were organized, Jews were shot in forests and gassed in vans.

There were three camps at Auschwitz by far the largest of all the camps:

Auschwitz 1

Auschwitz 2 - Birkenau

Auschwitz 3 - Monowitz

Auschwitz 1 - *Stanlager* - base or original camp. Constructed by Himmler, 1940 April, for Polish political prisoners.

Auschwitz 2 - Birkenau - 3 kilometers from A1. Constructed by Himmler, Spring 1941, for Soviet prisoners.

Summer 1941 Rudolf Hoess told by Himmler of 'Final solution' and informed of Auschwitz' isolated location.

Auschwitz 3: Monowitz - slave labour camp from 1941 with 45 smaller satellite camps: mostly rubber and chemical manufacture.

Auschwitz 2 Birkenau labour camp plus death camp

4 gas chambers: capacity 6,000 daily. Convoys from 15 different countries from March 1942 to August 1944 (Uprising of Sonderkommando: October 1944).

January 1945 Liberated by Soviet army

May 1940 - January 1945 1.6 million people deported, 90% Jews, 10% gypsies,

Poles, Soviet prisoners of war

'largest killing centre in history'

2. Visiting Auschwitz

From 1945 to 1989 the Soviet Union ran the museum at Auschwitz. The main exhibition and museum have not been changed for 40 years. The main museum is housed in the barracks at Auschwitz 1 which is where you will probably spend your time. These barracks were originally built by and for the Austrian army. At the other death camps as the Soviet army advanced, the Germans burnt the camps to try and destroy the evidence. At Auschwitz 1, 2 and 3 there was no time and 250 buildings remained. The Soviets made the barracks at Auschwitz I into a museum. A museum designed to document Nazi crimes not to explore the killing of the Jews or the organization of the camps. Until recently most of the annual 750,000 visitors were Soviet school children over 13 years of age. These children would be traumatized by the museum at Auschwitz I, and never visit Auschwitz 2 Birkenau by far the more important site.

So the barracks at Auschwitz I look like ordinary army brick barracks close together and in good condition with one storey added by the Nazis. You will see behind sloping glass walls:

- 2 tons of human hair
- hundreds of suitcases with name, date of birth and city of origin
- thousands of spoons
- intertwined spectacles and other items of physical aid
- the striped uniforms

The guide will not point out small display cases with documentation of orders for gas, supplies, evidence of the daily running of the camp. In addition to the main museum, other barracks house national displays from each country which suffered deportations. Often there is no mention that those deported were Jews. You will not gain much from visiting these blocks. At Auschwitz I prisoners were killed mostly by being shot. There is a wall where the shooting was done. And there is one small gas chamber where experiments in gassing were carried out. Next to it is the gallows where Hoess was hanged.

I propose that you ask your coach driver to approach Auschwitz I by driving through the town of Auschwitz (Oswiencin - the Polish name). First you will see on your right an area constructed by the Nazis for themselves and their families in idealized German style - prettified, vernacular and colourful - like a German village in the town. Then you approach Auschwitz I and you will notice how near the barracks are to the town: on the main road running out of Auschwitz. You will recognize the perimeter fence and watch towers - remember not one of them is original. They have all been replaced over time. The only horrific thing you see outside at Auschwitz I is the gate sign Arbeit Macht Frei, 'work makes free', in ornamental lettering as you enter the camp.

The important thing to do is to request time and the energy to visit Auschwitz 2 - Birkenau - 3 kilometers away. Here you will find something completely different. The Nazis razed the Polish village of Birkenau to the ground and built the camp to the

right and the left of the railway lines where there is a large reception area for the selections of people on arrival. Those able to work were sent to the camp, those not able to work were sent straight to the gas chambers.

There is no official museum here. The important thing to do is to walk through the site. You will approach through the famous entrance flanking the railway lines. As you proceed along the lines you will see the selection ramps and at the either side the small, low, wooden barracks (all restorations) in each of which hundreds of people were crammed. At the end of the railway lines you come to the four crematoria, two on either side. Remains of one (3) is clearly visible on the right. Beyond the crematoria are fields where the excess bodies were burned daily because the crematoria capacity was insufficient for the daily load. At the far end of the camp there is a field of stars and crosses and a memorial to Soviet prisoners. At the centre of the camp is a huge Soviet memorial.

All of this is being reconsidered by the Polish government together with individual advisers and consultants. The Commission set up by the Ministry of Culture in 1989 is called the Commission for the Future of Auschwitz. The question is what kind of museum should Auschwitz be? Should the current remains be destroyed? Should the buildings continue to be restored or left to decay? What kind of experience - educational, emotional, political and spiritual - should visitors - especially young visitors - have? There are many conflicting political interests involved:

Polish

Israeli

German

American

The Polish and Israeli conflict is most acute. The Americans have opened hundreds of Holocaust museums in the last few years culminating in a huge one in Washington

last year. There is debate at the moment as to whether there should be a Holocaust museum in central London. The best museum is in Jerusalem - Yad Vashem.

3. Understanding and Explaining

What are we talking about when we refer to 'Auschwitz'? Well, now you know - a set of museums and buildings and exhibits... All the types of identification are problematic:

1. The Holocaust:

This is a biblical term - used only since 1972, taken from the writings of Elie Wiesel. In the Old Testament it means a whole (holo) burnt offering (caust). When the animal sacrificed was offered wholly to God and no portion retained for human consumption, it is called a 'Holocaust'. Hence 'holocaust' is a holy term: it sacralizes what it refers to.

2. Extermination of the Jews: this is the Nazi term: it refers to the killing of animals: e.g. to exterminate rodents.

3. The Hebrew term Shoah means annihilation : many Jews prefer a Hebrew term. But the problem belongs to all people and to all languages.

4. Genocide: this sounds like a general term: it means killing of a people with no political motivation except to deprive them of existence. It was coined in 1944 by an international jurist Raphael Lemkin with particular reference to the Nazi plan to kill all of European Jewry. Now it has become generalized so that it is possible to ask in other cases whether they are cases of genocide. But was the killing of the Jews totally unmotivated?

There are 3 main kinds of explanations of the Holocaust:

1. Silence
2. Bureaucracy
3. Political Economy

1. Silence

This view is widely prevalent. Adorno is often quoted 'You cannot write poetry after Auschwitz'. But it is also the case that the most probing examinations were developed first of all in poetry and novels and memoirs (Primo Levi, If This is a Man, Elie Wiesel's, Night, Paul Celan's Poems).

The thinking behind this ban on representation and explanation is an argument that the horror and suffering will be denied or diminished by any approach which in any way relativizes what happened by inserting it in history. People who maintain this approach stress that the Holocaust is unique in history, human and divine. However, to know that something is unique you have to claim total knowledge of history past, present and future, which is what this approach is committed to denying.

2. Legal-Rational Bureaucracy

This approach is associated with Zygmunt Bauman's Modernity and the Holocaust. In it he argues that it was the nature of legal-rational legitimation that made it possible for the Holocaust to be carried out by people who were not mad or disturbed or necessarily anti-semitic but simply doing their duty as officials in an impersonal, neutral, hierarchical set of organizations. The sociological emphasis here is very important: that the rational structure of domination can be employed for irrational ends without anyone having responsibility for those ends or actively willing them.

The trouble with it is that the Holocaust was not carried out very efficiently; people did know what they were doing; and it overlooks the fact that there were ideas and interests at stake.

3. Political Economy

We need a political economy of the Holocaust. This is very daunting to the other two types of explanations for it involves everyone potentially in the kind of argument it

proposes and breaks down the safe distinction between: perpetrators (Nazis)/ bystanders (Poles)/ victims (Jews), (from Raoul Hillberg, The Destruction of European Jewry 3 vols.)

A colleague of mine is producing this kind of work now. His name is Robert Jan van Pelt and he is an architectural historian. He has opened 300 bundles of archive material at the Museum at Auschwitz 1 which no one has examined since the War. He discovered that before the Germans began to lose the war they had huge ambitions to colonize central Poland as a bulwark against Soviet Russia but also to provide land and labour for German peasants. Auschwitz 1 with its trans-European railway connections was to be developed into a large German city with the slave labour camp at its heart. From here German warrior-peasants were to be sent East to repopulate land taken from Polish peasants as well as from the Jews. The German plans to Germanize Poland are shocking and macabre in their details - plans to replant Polish forests with German trees, to replace Polish architecture with German architecture, even plans for German dog-kennels and German armchairs.

What are the implications of these discoveries? Jan van Pelt would stress two points: first, that these plans connect within the long-standing German ambition to colonize Eastern Poland. Max Weber in his essay 'Capitalism and Rural Society in Germany' in From Max Weber discusses the need to break up the large Eastern Junker estates and redistribute the land to a small thriving peasantry. This German ambition can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Second, it means that the murder of the Jews was motivated; it was part of a larger plan which represents hunger for land and labour and capital. This, more disturbingly, is something we can understand and something anyone can be part of. It puts a voice of explanation into the silence and the horror, but it is not a voice which simply stresses an impersonal, bureaucratic machine but an organic political will which can be recognized, documented and discussed.

In addition to the books I've mentioned I would add Michael Marras, The Holocaust in History (not the history of the Holocaust, note).

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1.3.1995