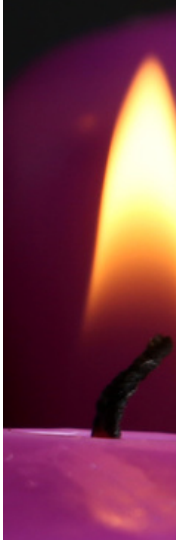


Reflections on The Holocaust Trust Lessons from Auschwitz Project

by Charlotte Smith

It is telling that while it is the number six million so often cited to impress upon people the scale of suffering the Holocaust caused it does not do justice to the impact of standing on Polish soil and witnessing the enormity of Birkenau extermination camp. Birkenau's immenseness cannot be understated nor truly understood until you look upon it with your own eyes, stretching out as far as the eye could see and then so, so much further. To me, it perfectly describes how the figure six million is simply an attempt to measure a level of pain, loss and tragedy that is in the end, completely immeasurable. Looking at vast rooms upon rooms of clothes, shoes, glasses, hair each ruthlessly stripped from Jewish men, women and children in an attempt to take their humanity before taking their life can make you question the very nature of the human race. Each Nazi perpetrator and their collaborators were individuals too with lives and families not nameless faceless monsters. Each victim and each perpetrator as human and as unique as you and me. How is it that we are capable of committing such atrocities against one another? How could we have stood by and let it happen? However, more importantly than what I have learnt about the dark side of humanity is our capability for the most incredible feats of strength, kindness and forgiveness even in the most abhorrent of times. While in Auschwitz I listened to a Rabbi tell the inspiring story of Dr Gisella Perl, one I'm not likely to forget. A woman who took an oath to heal and kept it through the most perilous of times saving countless lives while risking her own every day in Auschwitz. The expression on this man's face as he told her story, one of simultaneous intense pride and pain for his community has taught me more about antisemitism and the Jewish experience than a textbook education ever could.

As a people I think we'd like to imagine that we have moved on from the Holocaust, that we're more civilised than to be able to attempt to exterminate an entire population, more human, and that the Holocaust can simply be tucked away in a dark corner of history. The truth is that humanity has proven itself more than capable in times of hardship and hate of finding someone, anyone to blame. Since the Holocaust genocides have been committed in Rwanda, Bosnia, South Sudan, Cambodia, Armenia, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and many more. This list alone is confirmation of philosopher George Santayana's words 'those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it'. What has the world not learnt? Perhaps if we could close the gap from the idea of the Holocaust as a historical event into a deeply personal one of individual suffering we might learn because, as Holocaust survivor Ellie Wiesel said 'when you listen to a witness you become a witness'. Above all, it is vital to remember that the Holocaust has a face, a voice and a story and that it's a human one at that.



Reflections on The Holocaust Trust Lessons from Auschwitz Project
by Gabrielle Smithies

Before visiting Auschwitz, the figure six million was completely incomprehensible to me, six million Jewish men, women and children murdered by the Nazi regime and their collaborators. The shock of this figure can detract from the individuals involved, 6 million people were murdered. Six million people with passions and dreams, interests, personalities, friends and family- each of these people had a life, a life stolen by the Nazis. The Nazis attempted to strip the individuality of each of the victims of the Holocaust, attempting to replace their names with a number, stripping them of basic human rights and dignity.

As part of our visit we had the opportunity to speak to the Holocaust survivor, Steven Frank. Steven is an inspirational man and speaking to him was a great honour. Steven was born in 1935 into a secular Jewish family in Amsterdam- growing up he had no concept he was different. When Steven was five the Nazis invaded and occupied the Netherlands- forever changing Steven's life. In 1942 Steven's father was arrested, tortured and sent to the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Steven never saw his father again. In March 1943 Steven, his mother and brothers were taken to Barneveld and in September 1943 the group were sent from there to Westerbork, a transit camp. In September 1944 they were sent to Terezín (Theresienstadt) in Czechoslovakia, a camp where people were forced to live in terrible conditions with little food or access to water and disease was rife. Thanks to the valiant efforts of Steven's mother and the sacrifices she made within the camp namely working within the camp's laundry, the only source of fresh water within the camp; Steven, his mother and brothers incredibly managed to survive and were liberated by the Russian Red Army on 9th May 1945. Steven's family is the exception and not the rule- many families separated by the Nazis never saw each other again. Even when telling such a horrific story Steven's voice was unwavering- his bravery evident in every account he gave. Steven is just one of the individuals involved in the Holocaust, there are millions and millions of Steven Franks- each with their own passions, hopes and dreams, their own lives- either ended or irreversibly changed by the Nazi regime and their collaborators.

The 27th January 2023 marks the 78th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but the lessons from the Holocaust remain more important than ever; in the face of rising antisemitism and prejudice it is more important than ever to be tolerant and accepting, to stand up to discrimination and persecution- within our local, national and international communities. I urge you to use Steven's bravery as inspiration to make decisions which challenge the prejudice and hatred that the Holocaust and subsequent genocides were and continue to be fueled by.

