

# A Living Tradition Visit to Krakow and Auschwitz



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## Visit to Schindler Factory 29<sup>th</sup> July 2014



**Sign outside Schindler's Factory, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

This was a very good, interactive museum, which told a coherent story of Krakow during the dark days of the Nazi occupation from September 1939, until early 1945. It was able to make me feel emotional in many sections, perhaps especially in the last room, with its quotes from those who were sent to the the camps, some of these quotes going round on cylinders, like scrolls of the Torah. There were also two 'virtual books' which you could access by touching the screen and which looked at the contrasting reactions from those who witnessed the terrible events as they unfolded. The left-hand book was about the reactions of compassion and faith and solidarity with those who were suffering, whilst the right-hand one was about the hatred and betrayal others displayed during those long, dark years. Fortunately the left hand book had considerably more pages....

Some parts of the display made me feel very angry – a sure sign of a museum such as this, doing its job right. The arrogance of the Nazis, their casual cruelty, their wilful destruction of communities all should make any visitor realise just why the far-right, racism, fascism, must be confronted wherever it rears its ugly head ...never again...NEVER AGAIN.

I found it hard to walk past 3 bright red Nazi flags in one section, relating to the invasion of Poland in 1939.

I am proud that my father fought against the Nazis, although whilst we went to war ostensibly for Poland and in the end did little really to help the Polish people, who suffered so much, either in 1939 or again in 1945....

If you just watched films about the Second World War, made in Britain in the years immediately following the conflict, especially about the Battle of Britain, you would be excused for thinking that all of the few who were so much by so many were upper-class former public schoolboys from the South of England. Listening to real recordings of the conversations during the battle, you soon realise that this of course was utter nonsense; you can hear Scottish accents, Yorkshire accents, Geordie accents....and Polish accents.

It was so interesting to see the experience of the Second World War from the point of view of the Poles, rather than through the narrow prism of British history. They suffered so much...Jews especially along with groups such as the Roma and Sinti, but 'ordinary' Poles as well



**Schindler's Factory, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

### **Visit to the Jewish Museum in Klamimierz 30<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

This was a fascinating museum, in the way that it documented the lost Jewish life in what it called Galicia (East Poland/West Ukraine) area and how it has now disappeared. It also documented how the history of the Holocaust is kept alive – or in the case of the Ukraine not. It also documented how Auschwitz had begun life as anti-fascist museum, rather than about Jewish suffering and it was only after a number of years that this happened.

There was also a quote from a Ukrainian academic which linked the hatred of the 1930's and 1940's with the present conflict in east Ukraine – particularly poignant for somebody from Newcastle in light of the death of two Newcastle United fans among 298 tragically killed on flight MH17 on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> July.

There was also the following quote from a Jewish scholar:

“The more deeply immersed I become in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

I think this is very true and a reminder to all of us about the responsibility we all share to stand up to prejudice and hatred.

### **Visit to Auschwitz I 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014**

I got off the minibus from Krakow and as I walked towards the museum entrance, along a worn path in the grass outside, I had to just stop and stand in silence for a few seconds on catching my first glimpse of the blocks, seen so often on television and in pictures, but until you see it first-hand, you cannot really sense the horror of the place.

I entered and started to wander round. I didn't want a guide and I will discuss more about the guided tours later. I looked around the blocks then made my way to the southern end of the camp, where a building seemed to come out the ground. It had begun its 'life' by being a munitions store, but was later converted into....a gas chamber and ovens. Again, I had seen images of these places so often before, but nothing quite prepares you for being there.





**Gas Chamber and Crematorium Auschwitz I, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014**

I was transported back in time to 1973, when I first saw the ovens, courtesy of the London Weekend Television series, *A World At War*. As a boy I couldn't understand it. Now, I know a lot more about how the Germans were whipped into such hatred. They were manipulated by the press and politicians. That alone should set alarm bells ringing in Britain today.

But, I still don't understand it.....

In Auschwitz I all of the original blocks are still standing and, whilst some of them were closed, others held exhibitions showing aspects of the history of the camp from 1939 to 1945. Block 13 held an exhibition about the suffering of the Roma people, whilst another block adjacent to it described the liberation of the camp by the Soviet Army on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1945, including terribly poignant film of children showing their tattoos on liberation. There was also a section on the Polish contribution to the defeat of the Nazis.

One of the most poignant sections of all was the block containing the possessions of those who were sent to Auschwitz and were cruelly deceived into bringing suitcases along. There were shoes, tooth brushes, shaving brushes, combs, children's clothes... The most moving were the suitcases, with the names of the poor souls carefully written on them, in expectation of their

belongings being returned to them. The names and often their city of origin could really help with you to connect with the victims on an individual basis.

Another exhibition recalled the terrible life in Auschwitz, especially the deliberate lack of enough calories to survive on. Many of the inmates at Auschwitz I died not in the gas chambers, but from starvation, linked to the hard physical work they had to do, within two months of entering. There was a sculpture in the block representing the suffering from starvation – it had one lonely flower and a white scarf placed on it.

At least two of the blocks had rows of photographs on the wall of inmates, taken presumably on their entry into the camp, in their horrible striped uniforms, showing when they entered Auschwitz and when they died. Most only survived about two months. I looked into the eyes of some of the victims, these poor doomed souls; it was harrowing.

Another block represented the sanitary and living conditions in the camp. It showed how there had been just straw on the floor in the early days, as if it was a stable – no doubt part of the dehumanising process inflicted on prisoners. Later there were tri-level bunks, about two feet wide, each level of the bunk being a bed for two people. Another room featured rough matting on the ground.



**Barbed wire fence, Auschwitz I, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014**

Meanwhile all the while, as I walked around, I could hear the lorries on the road just outside, just as in the days when the camp was open by the Nazis, people had gone about their daily business, just yards from the terrible suffering and in many, mostly German, cases profited from it.

I couldn't help but notice that many visitors were being herded round. I wondered just how much time they had for any reflection. Perhaps they didn't want any. I wondered if they could have been at Housesteads...or any other historic site in the world. Perhaps I am being unfair as people are different and they could always reflect on it all later. However there was something disturbing about seeing people being herded round in a place, where so many were herded to shattering work, to this place, to that place....and to the gas chambers. Herded by people who themselves had often followed Hitler as if in a herd of unthinking sheep...

Blocks 10 and 11 were also very harrowing and moving. In between the blocks was the Death Wall, where prisoners were shot dead. In Block 11, I saw the rooms where prisoners undressed before being murdered – one for men and one for women. There was also the cell where the Polish Catholic Conventual Franciscan friar Maximilian Kolbe, who had volunteered to die in the place of a stranger. Small floral tributes marked this extraordinary deed of selflessness in Cell 28, just as there were tributes at the Death Wall itself.

Sitting quietly on a bench outside Block 11, I heard a wood pigeon, a sound I remembered from my childhood, as we had them in our back garden. How many of the prisoners heard them 70 years ago?

I couldn't help but reflect on how some people still think that the Nazis were right. How can they? How do you stop people from thinking that fascism, racism, hatred are right?

The exhibition in Block 20 was a little more modern than the others, describing how Belgian and French Jews suffered. There was the sound of a train engine in the background and on the wall at the back of the wall in a dimly lit room, words came up like Schnell and the other shouts the deportees would have heard. One fixed white light gave the appearance of the spotlight, which would have been fixed on those arriving on trains at Auschwitz.

In the last room of this block there were pictures of little children, not even born when war broke out on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, who were transported to their deaths at Auschwitz. It made me angry – it should make someone angry. I looked into the eyes of two young cousins about five years old...they were beautiful young children, just starting out in life....what can you say?

The sun, which had been shining for a while, went behind the clouds as if in shame – I wondered how often it ever shone at this terrible place.



**Hanging site. Auschwitz I, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014**

In Krakow I had seen anti-Semitic graffiti and on the way to Auschwitz, I had seen more anti-Semitic graffiti and even a spray-painted swastika. What has been learnt?

If you think racism in any way is acceptable.....go to Auschwitz.

How many visitors to Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau will go home and actively campaign against racism and hatred? How many will perceive the problem as not just a terrible blip in human civilisation, which all happened several decades ago now, rather than a pernicious ongoing struggle against the darker forces in human nature?

How many will go home and vote for racist far-right parties, not seeing the connections? How many will act a little more kindly? Hopefully they can stop before they utter words which might wound, or vote for parties whose appeal is based on xenophobia and racism...





**Sign at Auschwitz I, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014**

### **Visit to the site of Plaszow Concentration Camp 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014**

About 20 minutes south of Podgorze in Krakow is the site of the Plaszow Concentration Camp, which was made famous in the film Schindler's List, as the concentration camp where the 'Schindler Jews' worked under the tyranny of the infamous camp commandant Amon Goeth.

It was not the easiest place to find. There were a couple of signs, asking that people treat the place respectfully, given the site's grievous history. There is now a family living in the large house where Goeth lived. It didn't seem to me that much money needed to be spent to tidy the site up and make something more of it or that matter to buy Goeth's old house and turn it into a museum..



**View of the site of Plaszow Concentration Camp, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014**

You could still see a path made from the broken stones of the gravestones of the old Jewish graveyard, which had existed nearby before the German invasion of September 1939.



**Path, Plaszow Concentration Camp Site, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014**

The same gravestones, which had been used by the Nazis to make paths, were also used as an 'inspiration' for the design of the wall built around the Jewish ghetto in Podgorze, Krakow. The Nazis were notorious for this kind of 'cold joke'.



**Original wall around the Jewish Ghetto in Krakow, deliberately built in the shape of gravestones in Jewish graveyards, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

I picked up litter at Plaszow, trying in my own small way to pay my respects to those who had died there and laid a small stone at the small monument in Hebrew, standing for a short time.



**Memorial, Plaszow Camp, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014**



**Report of the ceremony on the International Genocide Remembrance Day of the Roma and Sinti – the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liquidation of the 'Zigeunerlager' in the Auschwitz – Birkenau Concentration Camp, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**



**The infamous railway lines, Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**

After paying a last short, silent, tribute to the thousands who died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz I, which I had first visited two days earlier, I walked to Birkenau early on a Saturday morning, as the sun began to break through the clouds, to deliver a beautiful, blue Polish sky. On the way I took a small detour close to the railway, which is still there, to see a memorial to the Jewish prisoners transported to Auschwitz, in the indignity of cattle trucks, two of which stood in silent tribute to those innocent people, who suffered so much.

It was just as I tried to find the way to the camp, wondering if I would have to return to the main road, that I saw it – the huge gateway at the entrance to the Birkenau site of the Auschwitz Labour and Death camp. I had seen it so many times before on films and in photos, but it still made me stand and just look, in a kind of shock at finally seeing that infamous archway, with the railway line still running through it, like some twisted version of the River Styx, separating the living from the dead.

It was still early, so I walked around the site, which was almost deserted, with it being early and most visitors to Auschwitz being content to just see Auschwitz I site. Yet it was here that most of the killing and suffering went on.

I walked round and looked around the site, which has mostly been preserved as it was in 1945. I walked in the blocks where people, who had been

sentenced to be killed, waited as in some kind of crude Death Row. I walked in the blocks where different groups had suffered, waiting for the selection, when they would join the hundreds of thousands of the others, who had already gone to their innocent deaths.

In one respect, with some blocks still fully built, whilst just the forlorn chimney stacks remained at others, and information signs explained the horror of what happened at each site.

This was not like any other visit to any other historical site on Earth. How could it be when I saw what's left of a building and before reading a sign showing that in front of me were the ruins of the Children's Block where the children who were used by Joseph Mengele's unspeakably disgusting experiments... I took a deep breath and sighed.. What can you say?



**Site of the block where the child victims of Joseph Mengele were housed,  
2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**

As I walked around, even amongst the tall fir trees, which tried their best to make at least part of the site a pleasant place – and I failed I hasten to add – there seemed to be little or no birdsong, as if even the birds knew this was a place to avoid, whilst in the background there was the haunting sound of a train in the distance.





**View of the site of the Roma Camp, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**

A number of Roma began to walk round the site from 10 a.m. and at least one was visibly moved, as indeed I was, when looking at the remains of one of the gas chambers and crematoria, about a hundred metres from the Zigenurlager. Poignantly you could still see the steps down which thousands of innocent men, women and children, took their last agonised steps.



**Steps Down to Gas Chamber, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**

Walking through wooded areas, where those children, women and elderly, who had just come off the trains and been selected to down, had to wait for their turn in the gas chamber, I came to the site of the Ceremony to remember the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liquidation of the Zigenurlager' the so-called Gypsy Camp' on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1944.

The ceremony, attended by in excess of 1 000 Roma and supporters, as well as dignitaries from the EU, various governments and the Papacy, began just before 12. 10 as a lead violinist, supported by three others and a stand-up bass player, hushed the crowd, with sweet, but, oh, so sad music.



### **Roma Memorial and ceremony 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**

After the introductory remarks, there were numerous speakers, from various Roma groups, different countries and individuals. They were all well-received. Many were in languages I sadly couldn't understand a, but nevertheless two did stand out.

A message from the President of the Republic of Poland described the events of 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1944, as a "terrible crime", going on to say that, "we, the people of today, have to repeat it loud and clear, that we shall never let another Porajmos, another extermination of Roma happen! Our obligation towards the victims of the Porajmos is not only commemoration, but also the imperative to stand up against any form of hostility towards the Roma and other ethnic minorities, any form of racism and xenophobia. This requires courage and determination from all the citizens of Poland and Europe."

A message from Pope Francis, included his desire to "express his deepest respect for the Roma People Association in Poland as well as other people who commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the extermination of Roma and Sinti, the sacrifice that was brought by 2897 innocent men, women and children who were exterminated in the gas chambers of the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1944, as well as the 23 000 sons and daughters of this nation who had been detained in this camp and suffered a terrible death".

Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament also spoke of what happened in the Porajmos and again re-iterated that the battle against racism in Europe is far from over: "for me as the President of the European Parliament it is of utmost importance that all inhabitants of Europe feel at home on our continent. Discrimination based on nationality, race, ethnicity,

religion or sexual orientation brings us back to these dark times of totalitarianism and fascism”.

Claudia Roth, the German Green Party member and Vice President of the Bundestag, spoke in German, a language I don't really know, although I could follow the speech in English to some extent. Despite my linguistic shortcomings, I thought she was excellent – she spoke passionately of the need for Roma to be respected as part of the wider European family and that Europe needs them. Claudia spoke of the guilt she felt as a German, although she was born 10 years after the end of the Second World War, for what was done to the Roma and Sinti people at Auschwitz and so many less well-known places. She really meant every word. Indeed at the end she seemed visibly distraught as she was embraced by a number of other speakers and kissed a Roma leader. It was so moving and a reminder that a lot of healing on all sides still needs to take place.

There was also a speaker in the Roma language, whose speech was translated into English, who said he wanted to apologise for those who had died for the lack of Roma unity. As a Youth activist for the Roma Genocide Remembrance Initiative, he noted that there were 40 at the first such event in 2010 whereas today there were 1 000. He also said of young people who go to Auschwitz: “we look and we don't forget”. Another young speaker in Roma spoke of the need to keep the culture alive.



**Roma Youth approaching the Genocide Memorial Ceremony**

This was a very dignified ceremony, which seemed to hit the right balance between remembrance of the past and reflecting on the lessons for now and the future. A number of the speakers spoke of the need to combat anti-Roma racism and anti-Semitism today. One speaker in German, spoke of the



danger of rising anti-Semitism in recent weeks in response to the fighting in Gaza, remarks which were warmly applauded, including by myself. Criticism of a government or an army should always be acceptable, but not the vilification of a whole group of people. Looking round Auschwitz as these kinds of comments were being made strongly reinforced my views in that direction. This was particularly true as I had seen anti-Semitic graffiti in Podgorze, the Jewish ghetto area of Katowice and on signs and walls by the side of the road from Krakow to Auschwitz. Across all the speeches as a whole there was a definite strain of Roma/Jewish solidarity, including a statement from Reuven (Ruvy) Rivlin, President Elect of Israel.

Behind me, I saw groups of young Roma sitting on the ruins of the walls of the blocks where so many Roma had suffered, sheletring from the hot sun, behind vibrant coloured Roma flags. There was something defiant about the scene, a final victory over the Nazis, which their forebears had been powerless to achieve. As the point was made in the speeches, the Roma as a people had survived the Porajmos, the devouring of their race.

There were huge beautiful wreaths from various Roma and non-Roma organisations, whilst many individuals had brought red roses to show their respect. I felt sorry that I hadn't brought one with me, but I didn't know to do so...However, I can say that the visit to Auschwitz and attendance of the ceremony on 2<sup>nd</sup> August vindicates all the long hours of human rights work I have done down the years with the Roma, the Karens of Burma and all the others I have hopefully been of some assistance to. If I have ever felt frustrated and tired, and I have and wondered why I do it, then the stark landscape of Auschwitz gave me the strongest possible answer.



**Wreath-laying at the Roma Genocide Memorial Ceremony**

After the event I spoke briefly with a lady at the small press desk about the work I have done in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She asked me how the Roma were faring there and I replied by saying how the government's austerity policies meant that times were hard for many people and how this made it difficult for the Roma too. However, I was also able to report that Roma I had interviewed for a book I had written, had said many favourable things about life on and the people of Tyneside and how proud this made me.

The politicians present at the ceremony and those representing politicians speaking on their behalf, spoke many fine words. We now have to see that these words are followed by actions from those who have the power to ensure that Roma are given all the human rights they are entitled to throughout the European Union and indeed Europe as a whole. The problem in numerous European countries today seems to be that governments pay lip service to giving Roma people their full rights and then turn a blind eye, when this doesn't happen.

I am also reminded of what a Roma said to me in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in June 2013, about funding for Roma organisations in Czech Republic:

"Things are not improving. Officially Czech politicians say everything is O.K. They have many programmes which are supposed to help Gypsies. They get money from Europe, but it does not go to Gypsy organisations. It goes to Czech organisations. These Czech organisations are supposed to work for Gypsy people, but they do not work with Gypsy people. They do not ask what Gypsy people want. For example, say the European Social Fund give 200 Euros to the Czech government to help with the education of Gypsy people. The Czech government will give it first to a Czech organisation. After that, there will only be 100 Euros of it left. Then that money will be passed on to another Czech organisation, who will take 50 of those Euros. Then it will go to another Czech organisation, who will take another 20 Euros. This will continue until at the bottom, there is an organisation run by Gypsies, who will get 10 of the original 200 Euros. There is no sense of partnership. They treat us like children."

It is clearly a step in the right direction to see such respect and remembrance for the Nazi victims of the Porajmos, but words alone are not enough to end the discrimination in many European countries, let alone the hatred and raw, repugnant racism. However, perhaps a wider and deeper understanding of the Porajmos can help people to fully understand just where prejudice and hatred towards Roma people can lead. I sincerely hope that such actions that are needed are now taken and that where there are laws against discrimination in various European countries they are rigorously enforced and where the laws need to be made more robust in defence of Roma rights then this happens as a matter of urgency



The message of the day seemed to be not only of remembrance, but of an active remembrance – a remembrance whereby we work to ensure that the Roma and Sinti victims and all the other victims of the Holocaust or Porajmos, are remembered through our actions and our work to eradicate racism and prejudice now and in the future.

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