



HEILSTORM: As one walks through the gates of Auschwitz, the cruelty of the sign that says ‘Arbeit mach frei’ (Work makes you free) hits you



BARBS AND BOUQUETS: Visitors to Birkenau (left) place bouquets on the tracks. (Above) Barbed wire fencing

A DAY IN AUSCHWITZ

January 27 marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945. TOI-Crest visits the camp which, bizarre as it might seem, has become one of Europe's leading tourist attractions

KALPANA SUNDER

Oswiecim reads the sign outside the station. The Germans called it Auschwitz. It looks like any other peaceful Polish town today. People walk to work and children play in the park. But almost no one can forget that it was in this camp that the Nazis murdered more than a million Jews as well as thousands of Poles, Soviets POWs, and gypsies. Many also died of starvation and the appalling sanitary conditions.

As one walks through the gates with the cruel lie of a sign that says ‘*Arbeit mach frei*’ (Work makes you free), an ominous gloom settles down on what was, just a few minutes ago, a smiling group of tourists. In the beginning, some people pose for photographs and talk on their mobile phones. Slowly, silence falls and people avoid even looking at each other. The electrified, barbed wire, grim brick buildings and brooding watch towers are still menacing after years of abandonment. One can almost imagine the tramping boots, the barking dogs and the shouts

BEDTIME STORY: The triple bunks where inmates were crammed like livestock



of the guards.

Block No 5 is where the tour starts, but for millions of Jews, it started on a cramped train, packed like sardines with no ventilation, no food and the bitter cold. When they arrived on the platform in Auschwitz, there was the infamous selection process. Says the guide, “With a flick of the hand, the SS decided the fate of a person. Women and children were separated from the menfolk as were the old and feeble from the young and strong.” They were all asked to mark their suitcases containing their prized possessions and leave them on the platform. Many were promised a warm meal and a shower but gassed on arrival. The ‘lucky’ ones were assigned a number and their photographs taken. After some time, even this was discontinued and the prisoners were tattooed.

Block after block, the guide takes us through the horrors. On the walls of one room are mugshots of men and women who had just arrived in Auschwitz, looking at us with charcoal eyes, some beaten, others

The pile of shoes reduces one to tears. People who came here but never left. Every pair a life snuffed out, a dream lost. Another exhibit has mountains of spectacles, shaving brushes and suitcases

filled with hope and confidence. Under the photographs are two stark dates: date of registration at the camp and date of death. Our guide tells us the story of one visitor who wanted a picture of a woman on the wall. She was his mother and he did not have a photograph to remember her by. A copy was managed from the archives. There are also images in black and white of anonymous masses. There is art by survivors who created scenes from their memory. There’s an especially poignant one of two escaped prisoners who are re-captured and made to stand under a sign in German which says, “Hurrah, we are back.” But there is worse to come: a section of tiny clothes and booties.

And then there is the hair — a mountain of braids and tresses and curls, once blonde, brunette and auburn. The hair, found by the Soviet army after it liberated Auschwitz, was used by the Nazis for lining clothes and bags. When the hair was analysed after the war, traces of poison used on people were found. But it was the pile of shoes that reduced one to tears. People who came here but never left. Every pair a life snuffed out, a dream lost. Sturdy ones, children’s footwear and leather belts. Another exhibit has



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mountains of spectacles, artificial limbs, shaving brushes and a pile of luggage marked with initials and dates.

Also on display are empty cans of the deadly Zyclon-B cyanide gas pellets. It was in Auschwitz that the Nazis perfected their method of mass murder. They even tested out methods of quick sterilisation, so that healthy Jews could be used for slave labour but prevented from breeding and crowding the “living space” for the Aryan race.

Next up is Block 11, the ‘Death Block’. Outside is the Black Wall of Death against which hundreds of prisoners were shot by the SS guards. Walking through the claustrophobic cells, the story of Father Maxmilian, a Polish priest who died to save another inmate, is the only ray of hope after seeing humanity at its worst. This block has starvation cells where people were left to die, tiny standing cells where as many as four prisoners were held for long periods.

INHERITANCE OF LOSS: Photographs of the men and men who passed through Auschwitz. (Left) The furnaces that burnt corpses. Last year, a record 1.38 million visited the concentration camps

Next is a nondescript looking building with no windows. Inside are the gruesome gas chamber and furnaces that burnt corpses daily. Even the presence of the gallows where the commandant of the camp and the sunken-eyed deputy to Adolf Hitler, Rudolph Hess, was hanged doesn’t make one feel like justice has been served.

Auschwitz does not prepare you for Birkenau or Auschwitz II (three miles away) which is about thirty times bigger than Auschwitz. The sheer vastness of Birkenau is bleak and numbs the senses. A landscape punctuated by barracks, rows of chimneys, a converging railway line and barbed wire fences. There are bouquets of flowers placed on the tracks, fluttering in the chilly wind. One can’t help thinking how the inmates managed without any warm clothing.

Inside the barracks, which were modelled on horse stables, are bunks, or rather wooden shelves, stacked three levels high. People slept here crammed like livestock. Our guide says that the people on the top bunks were the lucky ones since those lower down bore the brunt of rampant disease and diarrhoea. Toilets were just stone slabs with holes that inmates could use just once a day. Only the ruins of the gas chambers remain as the Nazis destroyed most of the chambers and crematoria when the Red army approached Auschwitz.

Why was the world quiet as this mass murder went on? Our ears ring with these unanswered questions. The guide’s voice booms, “Don’t say it was a good tour or that you enjoyed it, the point is that it will disturb you.” ■

THE DARK TOURISTS

Most of us head for the beaches, the mountains and the Disneylands when we want to holiday but there is a growing tribe of tourists who choose the unlikeliest of places for a break. From concentration camps to sites of nuclear disasters, TOI-Crest hits the dark tourism trail

● **CHERNOBYL** | UKRAINE

Next year, as Ukraine marks the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the country will also officially open the heavily contaminated area around the power plant to tourists. Private firms already offer tours which show visitors the remains of the No 4 reactor, feed them lunch (food is deliv-



ered from outside of the Chernobyl zone), and measure radiation levels.



● **ROBBEN ISLAND** | SOUTH AFRICA

Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years, is now full of crowds of tourists and gift shops. Former inmates act



as guides to make the experience come alive. The tour takes about four hours, with a walk through the prison compound and a drive around the island on buses bearing the slogan: ‘The journey’s never long when freedom’s the destination’.

● **CHOEUNG EK** | CAMBODIA

Driving out towards Choeung Ek, it is almost

impossible to believe that the Khmer Rouge genocide was unleashed here. Prisoners arrived at the Killing Fields under cover of darkness and were executed with hoes and spades to save precious bullets. Many of the mass graves remain undisturbed, fragments of bone poking through the baked earth. Clothing fragments are mixed into the soil as if the ground opened up and swallowed the living. The remains of 8,985 bodies that were exhumed are on display in a memorial stupa.

● **GROUND ZERO** | NEW YORK CITY



Thousands visit the site of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan every day. The future home of the Freedom Tower and a memorial complex, Ground Zero, is a powerful symbol of the world-changing events of September 11, 2001.

● **HIROSHIMA PEACE MEMORIAL PARK** | JAPAN

A Unesco world heritage site and the first ‘ground zero’, Hiroshima memorial park com-

memorates the over 140,000 lives lost on August 6, 1945 when a US N-bomb hit the city.

● **JALLIANWALA BAGH** | INDIA

India is no stranger to dark tourism with many visiting Amritsar’s Jallianwala Bagh where, in 1919, British troops blocked off a square without warning before firing 1,650 rounds into a crowd of peaceful protesters.

● **GENOCIDE MEMORIAL** | RWANDA

Rwanda has its mountain gorillas and its mountains of skeletons, but the latter are not swept under the carpet. The official Kigali City Tour, run by the government, features a visit to the Radio Mille Collines, a Hutu-owned “hate radio” station, and the Kigali genocide memorial centre which houses the graves of a quarter of million genocide victims, with new bodies brought in every year.



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