

## Chapel Service - Lessons from Auschwitz



Each year on 27 January the world marks Holocaust Memorial Day. It was on this day in 1945 that the largest Nazi extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was liberated. Earlier this year, Both Emma and I were invited to become ambassadors of the Holocaust Educational Trust.

At the Orientation Seminar we reflected on Jewish life in Europe before the war, heard a Holocaust survivor speaker, and considered why we were visiting authentic Holocaust related sites in Poland. We then went on a one day trip to Poland, with 180 other students, to visit 2 of the most infamous concentration camps in Poland.

Listening to the survivor was truly heartbreaking. When people think of the Holocaust they usually think about the mass murder in the death and concentration camps when in reality, that was only a small part. Renee Salt's story was truly upsetting, with her continuously being forced around Europe, losing members of her family one by one. But it was also almost heartwarming, learning about how people came together to try and protect and help one another, to keep each other alive. This helped us to make what happened more of a reality, instead of something that you see documented or dramatised on TV.

When Renee Salt, a survival speaker relayed her story, I was surprised at her strength of faith and resolve. I will share with you what she told us on that day:

"Those who survived Auschwitz or other concentration camps advocate hope not despair, generosity not bitterness, gratitude not violence. We must reject indifference as an option."

Having been provided with the opportunity to visit Auschwitz, we would like to spend this morning sharing our experiences with you as we feel it is our responsibility to ensure we never forget this time in history, and we must make certain that these atrocities never happen again.

Before we arrived at the camp, we visited the town Oświęcim in the area that the Nazis renamed Auschwitz. This town used to have a 58% of the population was Jewish. Today, there are no Jewish people living in Oświęcim. People who used to live side-by-side, with little to no discrimination were separated by the Nazis. While

## Chapel Service - Lessons from Auschwitz

we were there, our guides told us of a story of two young girls, who were separated as one had to leave, both not knowing that they were being deported because one of them was Jewish. The purpose of this was to make us realize the destruction of culture, customs and ideas that the Holocaust caused.



The significance and value of this trip we embarked on set in as the sign - translating into English; 'Work Sets You Free' - became visible. The Holocaust played such a pivotal role during the course of the 20th century's history. However, the very surreal horror of the death camps became more palpable as we entered.

No matter how many documentaries we had watched, nothing could prepare us for what we were about to see.



Beyond the infamous sign, we entered the prison camp where a number of brick buildings were arranged in parallel rows, surrounding a central pathway. Wooden watchtowers looked down from either end of the camp, whilst barriers of electrified barbed wire separated the compounds from one another. We retraced the journey down the pathway that stands for the suffering of many nations, particularly that of the Jewish Nation.

## Chapel Service - Lessons from Auschwitz

Although the Holocaust was the genocide of Jewish people, we must understand the reasons why other victim groups were persecuted in order to gain a full understanding of the Holocaust. Every individual who perished was part of a community and when we speak of loss, we also mean a loss of culture, customs and ideas, as well as people.

The camp has been left almost untouched, just as it was when the Nazi's retreated in January 1945, but now the majority of the blocks have been renovated into museums. Each museum is a block that has been given individual names to show the visitors the horrors which took place during the Holocaust, with various images and explanation panels.



Reading each explanation and visualising the pictures had quite a dramatic impact on us; it was much easier to picture what the victims had to endure, but seeing the real evidence left me without neither words nor feelings. I was stunned.

The Holocaust shows us that the perpetrators were human beings - just like anyone else - who were products of the society they lived in, and that they made choices based on a variety of reasons.

Dismissing their actions as 'evil' or 'mad', prevents our understanding of the Holocaust.

As well as showcasing the atrocities that humans are capable of, the tour also shed light on the sheer strength of the human mind and spirit; the manner in which many prisoners persisted to survive in these appalling conditions is truly honourable. I believe that no one can prepare for their reaction when visiting a concentration camp. It is an absolute necessity to experience it first hand to fathom how difficult it is to start explaining it.

## Chapel Service - Lessons from Auschwitz



One of the main aspects of the tour that struck me was seeing the personal belongings of the prisoners, including mountains of hair, shoes, kitchen utensils and clothes. It was endless, highlighting the true extent to which prisoners were duped into believing that Auschwitz was the start of their new life. One image that has become imprinted in my memory was a single child's shoes amongst a mass of thousands.



Later we visited Auschwitz 2. The cruelty and sadism that took place here is harrowing. At the spot in which the gas chambers lay, we each lit a candle to signify our remembrance and respect. This area is the most pervasive symbol of human suffering, and the depths of human cruelty. This is where millions lost their lives, persecuted for their race and religion, killed in the most inhumane way.



## Chapel Service - Lessons from Auschwitz

There are no exact figures of those who died at Auschwitz-Birkenau, although it is estimated to be around 1.2 million out of the total of 6 million. 6 million people were murdered, including 1.5 million children.

If you can't get your head round six million, think back to 9/11, and the Twin Towers being destroyed in New York. On that day 3,000 people died. In the Holocaust, it's as if 9/11 happened every day for five and a half years.

It only stops when each one of us takes a stand and asks: 'Why are you behaving like that?' If we all have the guts to stand up to this sort of prejudice, then we can prevent another holocaust.

However, Statistics are impersonal. Behind the 6 million who perished in concentration camps, are individuals who lived life across Europe. Focusing only on statistics obscure much knowledge about how and why the Holocaust happened.

Visiting Auschwitz teaches us about history, but more importantly about humanity. Some people are completely numbed, some react with a mix of emotions, whilst others are able to remain completely detached. Solely the fact that you are there is enough to pay the due respect to the victims, and to be aware of what human beings are capable of doing. Never again begins with you.



## Chapel Service - Lessons from Auschwitz

Prayer:

Almighty God full of Wisdom, remember all the forgotten and unrecognized heroes of Israel, who knowingly and willingly sacrificed their lives, for the sake of others.

In our hearts they will live forever and ever. Ruler of the Universe, open our hearts to the plight of the displaced and discarded members of our society, victims of the downsizing and reorganizations. People, who in silence bear the crushing burden, fear and despair of their collapsed world.

By helping them, we will honor the memory of the unknown heroes of the Holocaust.

Amen.